

A CRITICAL INTRODUCTION to KHOMEINI



EDITED BY
ARSHIN ADIB-MOGHADDAM

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As the architect of the Iranian Revolution of 1979, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini remains one of the most inspirational and enigmatic figures of the twentieth century. The Revolution placed Iran at the forefront of Middle East politics and the Islamic revival. Twenty years after his death, Khomeini is revered as a spiritual and political figurehead in Iran and large swathes of the Islamic world; in the West, he is remembered by many as a dictator and the instigator of Islamist confrontation. Arshin Adib-Moghaddam brings together both senior and emerging scholars in this comprehensive volume, which covers all aspects of Khomeini's life and critically examines Khomeini the politician, philosopher, and spiritual leader. The book details Khomeini's early years in exile from Iran, the revolution itself, and events that took place thereafter, including the hostage crisis and Iran-Iraq war. Lastly, the book considers his legacy in Iran – where Khomeini's image has been used by both reformist and conservative politicians to develop their own agendas – and further afield in other parts of the Islamic world and the West. Written by scholars from varying disciplinary backgrounds, the book will prove invaluable to students and general readers interested in the life and times of Khomeini and the politics of Islam that he inspired.

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I have followed a simple and accessible transliteration approach that adheres to the most common versions of foreign terms as they are used in English.

Glossary

Adl

The quality of being just. Referred to conceptually as ‘*Adalah*’.

Ahl al-Bayt

The People of the Household. Refers to the Prophet Mohammad and his immediate family and direct descendants through the lineage of Hassan and Hussein: Ali ibn Abi Talib (d. 661 AD), Fatima (d. 633 AD), Hassan ibn Ali (d. 669 AD), Hussein ibn Ali (d. 680 AD), Ali Zain al-‘Abideen (d. 712 AD), Mohammad al-Baqer (d. 733 AD), Ja’far al-Sadeq (d. 765 AD), Musa al-Kadhim (d. 799 AD), Ali al-Ridha (d. 818 AD), Mohammad al-Jawad (d. 835 AD), Ali al-Hadi (d. 868 AD), Hassan al-Askari (d. 874 AD), Mohammad al-Mahdi.

Akhbari

A legalistic designation found within Shi’ism that considers the use of reasoning (‘*aql*’) and *ijtihad* in discerning religious law from Quran and *Hadith* impermissible.

Aql

Reason.

Ashura

The tenth day of the Muslim month of Muharram, on which the Prophet’s grandson Hussein ibn Ali along with seventy-one companions, including his infant child Ali Asghar, young son Ali Akbar, and brother Abbas, were killed at the Battle of Karbala by the forces of the Caliph Yazid ibn Muawiyah in the year 680 AD. The month of Muharram is commemorated annually by Shi’i Muslims with sermons, poetry, and mourning, the day of Ashura considered the most important.

Ayatollah

Literally meaning “sign of Allah,” a title used to denote scholars that have reached the level of *mujtahid*, and having studied the Islamic sciences sufficiently are permitted to exercise *ijtihad*.

Bazaar

Marketplace.

Caliphate

(Arabic: *Khilafah*) The concept of Islamic succession to the Prophet in the areas of politics and leadership after his death, institutionalized in the governments of the Rightly Guided Caliphs (*Rashidun*) Abu Bakr (d. 634 AD), Umar ibn Khattab (d. 644 AD), Uthman (d. 656 AD), and Ali ibn Abi Talib (d. 661 AD), and existing in various dynastical forms until its dissolution in 1924 by Mostafa Kemal Ataturk. Considered a sacrosanct institution by many Sunnis, and illegitimate by the Shi’i. See Twelve Imams.

Faqih (Pl. Fuqaha)	A jurisprudent of Islamic law.
Fatwa (Pl. Fatawa)	A religious and legally binding edict or verdict produced by a <i>faqih</i> .
Fedaiyan-e Islam	Devotees of Islam, a clandestine Islamic organization group founded in Iran by Navab Safavi (d. 1955), dedicated to assassinating officials of the Shah’s regime and intellectuals accused of “corrupting” Muslim society.
Fiqh	Jurisprudence.
Gharbzadegi	A concept and term introduced by Jalal Al-e Ahmad (d. 1969) in 1962, translated as “Westoxification,” “Occidentosis,” or “Westruckenness.” Denotes the mimicry and models of Western culture by Iranians at the expense of their own.
Ghayba	(English: “Occultation”) The period of absence or “hiddenness” of the Twelfth Shi’i Imam, extending from his disappearance in 873 AD until the present day, within which there will remain no representatives (Farsi: <i>vakil</i> ; Arabic: <i>wakil</i>) in direct contact with him until his reappearance at the end of time. Usually used with reference to the Greater Occultation (<i>Ghaybat al-Kubra</i>), and not the Lesser Occultation (<i>Ghaybat al-Sughra</i>) that occurred between the birth of the Twelfth Imam and the year 941 AD, wherein representatives of the Imam still maintained a direct link with the Shi’i community and relayed his guidance.
Grand Ayatollah	See <i>Marja-e Taqlid</i> .
Hadith (Pl. Ahadith)	A narrated tradition detailing the sayings and practices of the Prophet and Twelve Imams.
Haram	Impermissible.
Hawza	Seminary.
Ijma’	Consensus.
Ijtihad	Interpretation of classical sources of jurisprudence, using one’s reason, in order to ascertain new rulings within a modern context.
‘Ilm	Knowledge pertaining to Islam and Islamic law.
‘Irfan	Islamic mysticism/gnosis. Not to be confused with Sufism, which is the more systematic and organized practice of ‘ <i>irfan</i> within a <i>tariqa</i> (Sufi order).

<i>Ithna ‘Asheri</i>	Literally meaning “Twelver,” the predominant school of thought within Shi’i Islam that takes its name from the belief in the legitimacy of Twelve successive Imams following the death of the Prophet.
<i>Ja’fari</i>	A school of <i>fiqh</i> developed by the sixth Shi’i Imam, Ja’far al-Sadeq. See also <i>Ithna ‘Asheri</i> .
<i>Khatt-e Imam</i>	Line of the Imam. Refers to the fundamental principles of Ayatollah Khomeini’s political platform.
<i>Khums</i>	A 20 percent taxation applied to surplus income and savings within the Usuli-Shi’i community paid to the chosen <i>marja-e taqlid</i> of a believer, which is subsequently redistributed among the Shi’i community on behalf of the Twelfth Imam.
<i>Madrasa</i>	School.
<i>Majlis</i>	Place of meeting. Within the context of political affairs, refers to a council or parliament.
<i>Marja-e Taqlid</i>	Literally “source of emulation,” and sometimes referred to as Grand Ayatollah, the highest rank of scholar within Shi’i Islam, permitted to issue <i>fatawa</i> and solicit emulators. See <i>muqalid</i> .
<i>Marja’iyat</i>	See <i>Marja-e Taqlid</i> .
<i>Mazhab (Pl. Mazaheb)</i>	(Arabic: <i>Madhab</i>) School of <i>fiqh</i> , usually refers to four most orthodox Sunni schools (Hanbali, Hanafi, Maliki, Shaf’i) and two most orthodox Shi’i schools (Ja’fari, Zaydi), but also to a number of minority schools.
<i>Mojahedin-e Khalq (MEK)</i>	People’s Mojahedin of Iran, a Marxist-Islamic terrorist organization established in 1965.
<i>Mostakberin</i>	(Arabic: <i>Mostakbaran</i>) Oppressor.
<i>Mostazafin</i>	(Arabic: <i>Mustaddafan</i>) Oppressed.
<i>Motlaqeh Vali-ye Faqih</i>	Absolute guardian jurist, with the absolute authority to rescind and introduce laws according to his interpretation of <i>fiqh</i> , and (if necessary) according to broader political objectives associated with safeguarding an Islamic state.
<i>Mujadid</i>	A personage found within Sunni theology said to appear every century in order to

“renew” the Islamic faith.

Mujtahid (Pl. Mujtahideen)

An Islamic scholar that has either begun studying or completed studying the highest level of religious studies and is permitted to exercise *ijtihad* and thus no longer bound to being a *muqalid* of an Islamic authority other than themselves. See *Muqalid*.

Muqalid (Pl. Muqalideen)

A Muslim that, in lieu of being able to exercise *ijtihad* on his or her own, emulates and follows the religious rulings of a *marja-e taqleed*.

Occultation

See *Ghayba*.

Resalah

A book of *fatawa* that pertains to the everyday practice of Islamic faith, written and issued by different *marja-e taqleed*.

Shariah

Literally meaning “path” or “road,” refers to Islamic law.

Tajdid

The act of renewing or reviving Islam. See *Mujadid*.

Taqiya

Religious dissimulation, employed by both Shi’i and Sunni under circumstances of religious persecution, where one’s life would be threatened on the basis of being visibly Muslim.

Tudeh

Iran’s communist party, established in 1941.

Twelve Imams

A succession of twelve rightful leaders of the Muslim community following the death of Prophet Mohammad, appointed and drawn from his family through the line of Fatima, consisting of: Ali ibn Abi Talib (Imam Ali), Hassan ibn Ali (Imam Hassan), Hussein ibn Ali (Imam Hussein), Ali Zain al-‘Abideen (Imam Zain al-‘Abideen), Mohammad al-Baqer (Imam al-Baqer), Imam Ja’far al-Sadeq, Imam Musa al-Kadhim, Ali al-Ridha (Imam Ridha), Imam Mohammad al-Jawad, Ali al-Hadi (Imam al-Hadi), Hassan al-Askari (Imam al-Askari), and Mohammad al-Mahdi (Imam Mahdi).

Ulema (Sgl. ‘Alim)

Religious scholars.

Umma

The transnational Islamic community.

Usuli

A legalistic designation within Shi’ism that regards it as permissible and in many cases mandatory to discern contemporary religious laws from Quran and Hadith by use of reasoning (*‘aql*) and *ijtihad*.

Vali-ye Faqih

(Arabic: *Wali al-Faqih*) The leading Islamic scholar within the system of *Velayat-e Faqih*. See *Velayat-e Faqih*.

Velayat-e Faqih

(Arabic: *Wilayat al-Faqih*) Guardianship of the Jurist. The official ideology of the Islamic Republic of Iran, developed by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, which holds that in the absence of the Twelfth Shi'i Imam, legitimate authority and leadership over the Islamic community should fall to an expert in *fiqh* drawn from the *ulema*, who will act as his delegate.

Wilayah

(Farsi: *Velayat*) Authority or guardianship.

Timeline: The Life of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini (1902–1989)

- On September 24, 1902, Khomeini is born in the town of Khomein. His family stems from a line of religious training, descending from the seventh Imam of the *Ahl al-Bayt*, Imam Musa al-Kadhim.
- In 1903 his mother, Hajieh Agha Khanum, raises him following the murder of his father, Mostafa Hindi.
- At the age of six, Khomeini begins his studies, focusing on the Quran and elementary Persian.
- In 1920, he moves to Arak to study theology under the tutelage of the famous Shaykh Abdul-Karim Ha'eri, a leading *marja-e taqlid*.
- In 1921, the seminary is moved to Qom and Khomeini follows his teacher, becoming part of the Fayzieh seminary and residing at the Dar-al Shafa School.
- In 1929, Khomeini forges a family by marrying Khadijeh Saqafi (also Batul, Ghods-e Iran Saqafi). The two have five children that survive infancy: Mostafa (d. 1977), Ahmad (d. 1995), Zahra, Farideh, and Sadiqeh.
- In 1937, Ha'eri dies. Ayatollah Borujerdi succeeds him as the leading religious authority in Qom and the rest of Iran.
- Khomeini develops an interest in philosophy and *'irfan*, influenced heavily by Plato, Mulla Sadra, Ibn Arabi, and his teacher at the time, Mirza Muhammad Ali Shahabadi. In Shahabadi's work he finds a synthesis of politics and *'irfan*.
- In the 1930s, Khomeini lectures at Fayzieh and has his work on hadiths, ethics, and mysticism published.
- In 1943, Khomeini publishes his first book, *Kashf-e Asrar (Secrets Unveiled)*.
- On May 4, 1944, Khomeini makes his first public political statement. In it, he beckons Muslims to struggle against foreign domination.
- Khomeini continues lecturing and publishing throughout the 1950s in Qom.
- In 1961, Grand Ayatollah Borujerdi dies, and Khomeini positions himself as a major Ayatollah in Qom.
- In 1962, Khomeini pressures the clergy into a sustained dissent to repeal a law that requires all individuals elected into local and provincial councils to be sworn into office on an unspecified holy book.
- In January 1962, the Shah launches his White Revolution, seeking a referendum for popular approval. Khomeini pleads with the clergy to boycott the referendum in 1963. The turnout is weak on voting day.
- On March 21, 1963, Khomeini calls for the Noruz festivities to be canceled as a sign of defiance toward the government's policies. The response from the government was unequivocally violent.
- On April 3, 1963, Khomeini declares that the government is intent on doing away with Islam, and takes its instructions from the United States and Israel.
- On Ashura, June 3, 1963, Khomeini delivers a speech drawing a comparison between the Shah and Umayyad Caliph Yazid ibn Muawiyah. This lands Khomeini in prison and sparks the Khordad movement, or June uprising.

- In 1964, Khomeini denounces the Shah for extending diplomatic immunity to American military advisers. The Shah exiles Khomeini to Turkey, and a year later, to Najaf, Iraq.
- Khomeini spends the next thirteen years in exile in Najaf, during which he teaches religious jurisprudence at the Shaykh Murtaza Ansari *madrasa*.
- Khomeini lectures and writes letters that make their way into Iran via pilgrims who visit Najaf and the holy shrine of the first Shi'i Imam, Ali ibn Abi Talib.
- On April 16, 1967, Khomeini sends a letter to Prime Minister Amir Abbas Hoveyda, accusing the regime of thievery and terror.
- During the Six Day War of 1967, Khomeini forbids relations with Israel and the purchase of its products.
- In 1967 he issues a *fatwa* concerning the Family Protection Law of 1967, claiming it to be in defiance of Islam.
- In the first months of 1970, he gives lectures on what would be the defining theory of governance for the Iranian Revolution, *velayat-e faqih*. The premise of this theory is a claim that qualified *ulema* were capable of running the political and juridical functions of the state.
- In October 1971, Khomeini comments on the celebrations marking 2,500 years of Iranian monarchy.
- Khomeini prohibits membership of the Hizb-i Rastakhiz, in defiance of the Shah's move to forge a one-party political system.
- On the 1975 anniversary of the Khordad uprisings, students from Fayziya hold demonstrations for three days and are met with an entourage of ground troops and military helicopters.
- From 1977–1979, the revolution unfolds in waves of demonstrations at schools, mosques, and seminaries and through strikes by unions and workers.
- Khomeini demands the Shah's departure before his return from exile. On February 1, 1979, millions fill the streets to hail his return.
- He deems the government of Shapour Bakhtiar illegitimate and appoints his own Prime Minister, Mehdi Bazargan.
- On March 30 and 31, 1979, 98 percent of those voting in a referendum opt to abolish the monarchy and establish an Islamic government.
- In December, the new constitution was passed through national referendum. Khomeini becomes *vali-ye faqih*, and in February 1980, Abolhasan Bani Sadr became the first elected president of the Islamic Republic.
- On November 4, 1979, a group of students calling themselves Muslim Student Followers of the Imam's line take control of the US Embassy in Tehran.
- In 1980, Khomeini is named Man of the Year by the US news magazine *TIME*. The magazine describes him as the “virtual face of Islam in Western culture ... the mystic who lit the fires of hatred.” During the hostage crisis and amid the state of revolutionary turmoil, Saddam Hussein sees an opportunity to launch an offensive war. The Iran-Iraq war would last eight years, beginning in September 1980.
- Due to mounting economic problems, neighboring Gulf and Arab states' support of Iraq, and Western aid and support of Iraq, Khomeini decides in July 1988 to accept a truce – as he put it, to “drink the poisoned chalice.”
- During the mid-1980s, the Iranian government becomes complicit in the Iran-Contra scandal.
- In February 1989, Khomeini comes under international scrutiny for issuing a *fatwa* condemning the writer Salman Rushdie to death for his “blasphemous” novel *The Satanic Verses*.
- Khomeini dies on June 4, 1989, after spending eleven days in hospital. Millions of mourners swarm the streets and attend his funeral.

- Ayatollah Ali Khamenei is elected as the Islamic Republic's second *vali-ye faqih* by the Assembly of Experts (*Shoray-e khebregan*).



1. Map of Iran

Introduction Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini: A Clerical Revolutionary?

Arshin Adib-Moghaddam

By all standards available, Ayatollah Khomeini was a giant of the twentieth century. The Iranian revolution of 1979, which unfolded so eclectically under his leadership, quite literally shook the world. As all giants of history, Khomeini left an indelible imprint on the consciousness of his people, a stock of shared memories that is constituted by nostalgia, reverence, utopia and loyalty on the one side and exile, tragedy, anger and rejection on the other. Comparable to the impact of other revolutionary leaders of the twentieth century – Lenin, Mao, Castro – Khomeini’s era seriously affected both the personal life of the people he eventually came to govern and the trajectory of world politics.

By virtue of their gigantic projects, revolutionary leaders claim history in its entirety. Theirs is, by definition, a rebellion against the planetary order that promises to bring about universal, not relative, change. So, too, Khomeini in 1979 was not a reformist; he was not in Iran to compromise with the ancien régime of the Shah. He was there to define, once and for all, what he considered to be the ideal political and social order for human beings, that he thought applicable not only to Iran but throughout the globe. As he proclaimed from exile in Neauphle-le-Chateau at the height of the revolutionary fervour in that fateful winter of 1978/1979:

Great People of Iran! The history of Iran, even world history, has never witnessed a movement like yours; it has never experienced a universal uprising like yours, noble people! ... Our lionhearted women snatch up their infants and go to confront the machine guns and tanks of the regime; where in history has such valiant and heroic behaviour by women been recorded? ... Fear nothing in your pursuit of these Islamic goals, for no power can halt this great movement. You are in the right; the hand of God Almighty is with you and it is His will that those who have been oppressed should assume leadership and become heirs to their own destiny and resources.¹

Revolutionaries’ strive to establish a new order in word and deed and are not satisfied with reforms or token amendments to the state and the socio-economic system in place. To that end, Khomeini targeted history from a radical standpoint. Also always concerned with legacy, memory and method, he was aware that the revolution had to be grandiose and performed as such. “It is important for the awakening of future generations and the prevention of distortions by partial opponents [*moqreza*],” he wrote in a preface to a prominent book about him published three years after the revolution, “that fellow writers correctly analyse the history of this Islamic movement and transcribe the exact dates and motivation behind the demonstrations and revolts of Iran’s Muslims in the various provinces.”² Here and elsewhere, Khomeini spoke in momentous terms – world history, nobility, God, universality, heroism, Islam, greatness – these are the ingredients of his inflated discourse that were geared to the revolutionary momentum that Iranians were driving.

The preamble to the constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran which was adopted by referendum

on 24 October 1979, reiterated that message. It describes the revolution as “unique” in comparison to previous Iranian revolts such as the “anti-despotic movement for constitutional government” in 1906, and the “anti-colonialist movement for the nationalisation of petroleum” led by Mohammad Mossadegh between 1951 and 1953. “The Muslim people of Iran” learned the lessons of history because “they realised that the basic and specific reason for the failure of those movements was that they were not religious ones.” As opposed to those previous disappointments, “the nation’s conscience has awakened to the leadership of an exalted Authority, His Eminence Ayatollah Imam Khomeini, and has grasped the necessity of following the line of the true religious and Islamic movement.” Followed by a long section on Khomeini’s central role in leading the revolution headlined “The Vanguard of the Movement,” it is further stated that Iran’s “militant clergy, which has always been in the front lines of the people’s movement, together with writers and committed intellectuals, has gained new strength (lit: impetus) under his leadership.”³ Quite from the outset then there was no doubt about the importance of Khomeini to the legitimization of the revolutionary process in Iran. It is this centrality to the revolution that was spearheaded by Iranians from all walks of life which turned him into a personality and topic of intense contestation.

Giants, by virtue of their size, accumulate the power to entice and motivate, to destroy and rebuild. Revolutionaries move in absolute terms without much consideration for the fate of those that they consider an impediment to their radical ideas. There is a lack of grace and subtlety in the abrupt and bulky movements of revolutionary giants. So when Khomeini became embroiled in the revolution in Iran in 1979, it was inevitable that he would become a divisive figure. He was, after all, under the impression that his was a just battle in support of the oppressed against their oppressors. “What is important for me is resistance against oppression [*zulm*],” he proclaimed repeatedly. “I will be wherever this resistance is pursued the best.”⁴

In light of this dichotomisation of the world into a cosmic battle between justice and evil, the revolution in Iran, like other revolutions before it, created immense fissures. Even when Khomeini was adamant about keeping the unity of the revolutionary forces, when he appealed to the “various classes of the nation,” the students, religious minorities, scholars, professors, judges, civil servants, workers and peasants,⁵ and declared himself the brother of all of them, he made clear that attacks by counter-revolutionaries “club-wielding thugs and other trouble-makers” may result in their killing.⁶ Likewise, Khomeini deemed it permissible to kill members of the Iranian armed forces in self-defence, if they were directly responsible for the killing of demonstrators against the Shah or a major pillar of his regime.⁷

It was in that way that Khomeini’s discourse created an internal “other,” the counter-revolutionary menace that needed to be uprooted in order to cleanse the residues of the previous order in a grand effort to recapture a seemingly lost but realistically irretrievable history, in the case of Khomeini and his followers encapsulated in the quest for an “authentically” Islamic identity for Iran. However, death was not exclusive; it was not only the counter-revolutionary other that was threatened. Comparable to the discourse permeating the other great revolutions of modern history – Russian, Cuban, Chinese – the Iranian revolutionaries, too, blurred the boundaries between life and death in order to stress the momentous importance of the struggle at hand. After all, despite the wave of executions that occurred after the revolution, more Iranians supporting Khomeini died than those opposing him, not at least in the trenches of the Iran-Iraq war between 1980 and 1988. As such, the revolution claimed the lives of both self and other, revolutionary and counter-revolutionary, which explains why no Iranian remained untouched by the events. Despite repeated calls for a non-confrontational policy, Khomeini, as indicated, accepted death as an inevitability of the revolutionary process in Iran. As he proclaimed

in an address to the Pope – who tried to mitigate the repercussions of the U.S. embassy takeover by Muslim students supporting Khomeini – including the threat of U.S. military strikes, in November 1979:

We fear neither military action nor economic boycott, for we are the followers of Imams who welcomed martyrdom. Our people are also ready to welcome martyrdom today. ... We have a population of thirty-five million people, many of whom are longing for martyrdom. All thirty-five million of us would go into battle and after we had all become martyrs, they could do what they liked with Iran. No, we are not afraid of military intervention. We are warriors and strugglers; our young men have fought barehanded against tanks, cannons, and machine guns, so Mr. Carter should not try to intimidate us. We are accustomed to fighting and even when we have lacked weapons, we have had our bodies, and we can make use of them again.⁸

Revolutionaries claim the individual in its entirety. Khomeini was not content to claim the consciousness of Iranians; his discourse targeted them all the way down to their bodies. As such, the Iranian revolution did not only engender new institutions that had never existed in human history in this shape and form before – a Supreme Jurisprudent (Vali-e faqih), a Council of Guardians (Shoraye negahban), an Assembly of Experts (Shoray-e khebregan) – in addition, the revolution added to this formal “macro-sphere” of high politics very immediate “micro-norms” that were meant to reengineer Iranians within an increasingly Islamicised system. Khomeini’s vision of governance as a synthesis of religious, moral and political ordinances was not without precedence in Iranian history.⁹ Even the ancient kings of Persia, loathed by the revolutionaries because of their association with the ideology of the Shah, claimed the guidance of god (Ahura Mazda) in their cosmic dealings with their subjects and the world that they so stunningly dominated. But the innovative, if egregious, fusion of republicanism and (Shi’i) Islam that underpins the Islamic Republic of Iran until today is without precedence and did not limit itself to the sphere of high politics or the state. Rather the contrary; in truly modern fashion, the revolution, as it was pursued by Khomeini and his followers, reached all the way down to the subjectivity of Iranians. From mundane examples such as the emergence of the beard as a revolutionary symbol, the aversion to ties and miniskirts as manifestations of western decadence and the corruption of Iranian culture under the Shah to substantial and legalised curtailments of individual rights, especially for women, the moralistic discourse offered by Khomeini was not merely premised on political change, it was meant to produce the ideal *homo Islamicus*:

Governments that do not base themselves on divine law conceive of justice only in the natural realm; you will find them concerned only with the prevention of disorder and not with the moral refinement of the people. Whatever a person does in his own home is of no importance, so long as he causes no disorder in the street. In other words, people are free to do as they please at home. Divine governments, however, set themselves the task of making man into what he should be.¹⁰

The blind spots of and loopholes in this grand effort to reengineer subjectivity in Iran are obvious, which is why Khomeini’s discourse created spaces of dissent and resistance where Iranians attempted to push back the gigantic intrusions into their individual preferences and daily lives by the state. It is within the sphere delineated by approval and rejection where the legacy of Khomeini is contested

within Iran and beyond until today. But undoubtedly, Khomeini successfully supervised the institutionalisation of a new form of governance that has not existed in human history before and has survived a devastating eight-year-long war against Saddam Hussein's Iraq, a comprehensive sanctions regime spearheaded by the United States, and continuous military threats by Israel. Not unlike Khomeini himself, the political system in Iran proved itself steely, somewhat stoic and indomitable. Hence, after more than three decades, the Islamic Republic continues to be a stable if contested invention.¹¹

Biographical Trajectories

There are a few constants in Khomeini's biography that reveal the tensions in his political thought which appears, at times, eclectic and paradoxical. How could Khomeini talk about the God "given right of liberty and freedom" that Islam guarantees and proclaim that "freedom is the primary right of humans" and tolerate the execution of political prisoners throughout the first decade of the revolution?¹² How could he write love poetry and constrain art and literature in Iran at the same time? What influences affected his political and social attitudes?

Some scholars have taken the short route to explain the tensions in Khomeini's thought. They argue that he was a cynical opportunist. He would say one thing to Iranians in order to secure their support for the revolution and do something else in practice. There is no doubt that Khomeini's utopian vision was implemented with a good deal of Machiavellian pragmatism. He had to navigate within a context that was not really Islamic in the sense he interpreted Islam, and was aware that he had to compromise – as he did at the beginning of the revolution – with other forces including the liberal-nationalist *Nehzat-e azadi-ye Iran* (Freedom Movement of Iran), led by the first Prime Minister Mehdi Bazargan, and liberal technocrats such as Abolhasan Bani Sadr, who became the first president of the Islamic Republic.¹³ But the adherence to a highly politicised, interest-based and state-centric interpretation of Islam in Iran was also due to his convictions as a cleric, religious scholar and theologian. In many ways, Khomeini was a *mujtahid* first and a revolutionary second; his radical messages were always also steeped in legalistic premises informed by his interpretation of the Shi'i tradition of *usul al-fiqh* (principles of Islamic jurisprudence).

As a consequence of that theological outlook, the *ulema* (clerics) occupied a central role in Khomeini's political discourse. In almost all of his major proclamations before, during and after the revolution, he stressed their centrality. For instance, in 1967 in an open letter to the Shah's Prime Minister Amir Abbas Hoveyda when he described them as "the guardians of the independence and integrity of the Muslim countries"¹⁴ or in 1971 in a message to the pilgrims in Mecca, when he demeaned their "oppression" by the Shah and foreigners,¹⁵ and their apathy in the face of tyranny which betrayed the legacy of "Imam Hussein's bloody revolt" against the Umayyad caliph Yazid in the seventh century AD.¹⁶ After his return to Iran in 1979, he supported the involvement of the *mujtahideen* of the newly established "Revolutionary Council" in the cultural revolution with the aim to "Islamize" the universities in order "to make them autonomous, independent of the West and independent of the East [i.e. the Soviet Union]," to establish an "independent university system and an independent culture."¹⁷ Undoubtedly, Khomeini gave a special place to what he occasionally referred to as the "clerical class."¹⁸

This should not come as a surprise. The clerical strata of Iranian society were the primary reference point for Khomeini throughout his life. His clerical worldview is one of the few constants that can be drawn from his biography. Surely, if Khomeini had been born an aristocrat tied to the

ruling monarchs or into a working-class family, his views on Iranian politics would have been rather different. But his biography made it inevitable that there would emerge a clerical approach to politics, culture and society: He was born Ruhollah Musawi Khomeini on September 24, 1902, into a middle-class clerical family in the small town of Khomein. The family origin of his ancestors was linked to the seventh Imam of the Shi'i Imam Musa al-Kazim, which identifies the family as "Musawi Seyyeds" who claim descent from the Prophet Mohammed. His immediate ancestors had immigrated to Iran from Northern India, where they had settled from their original abode in Neishapur in North-Eastern Iran in the early eighteenth century.¹⁹ His grandfather, Seyyed Ahmad Musawi "Hindi" (literally "the Indian"), was invited to the town of Khomein by a certain Yusef Khan during pilgrimage to the shrine city of Najaf in Iraq, where Ali, the first Imam of the Shi'i, is buried. Seyyed Ahmad was a contemporary and relative of Mir-Hamed Hossein (d. 1880), who authored several widely distributed volumes on disputes between Sunni and Shi'i in the traditional religious canon.

Khomeini's father Mostafa kept the religious tradition of the family alive and trained as a *mujtahid* first in Isfahan in Iran, and then in the *atabat* (shrine cities) of Samarra and Najaf in Iraq. In March 1903, just about five months into Khomeini's life, Mostafa was murdered under disputed circumstances. With such a prominent religious tradition within the family, there was no doubt that Khomeini would pursue the clerical path as well. His education commenced in earnest between 1920 and 1921 at the Mirza Yusuf Khan *madrassa* in Arak (previously Sultanabad), which hosted Sheikh Abdolkarim Haeri (d. 1936), one of the most preeminent religious scholars in Iran during that period. At this stage of his studies, Khomeini focused on logic and (Ja'fari or Ithna 'asheri) jurisprudence, and was firmly steeped in the clerical traditions of the day. He continued his studies in jurisprudence, gnosis, ethics, philosophy and semantics at the Dar al-Shafa in Qom, which was the principle centre of religious learning in Iran and a major pilgrimage site due to the Shrine of Hazrat-e Masoumeh, a daughter of Musa al-Kazim (745–799 AD). Khomeini was to forge a career in Qom that spawned four decades (1923–1962), over a period that turned him into an influential religious scholar and increasingly vocal political personality.²⁰

The methodical lifestyle that Khomeini followed, signposted by praying, studying, lectures and teaching, may explain the discipline that many of his associates and biographers attributed to him. According to one observer, Khomeini adhered to a "systematic" daily routine, and even followed a particular method in his movements.²¹ He would always step "on the minbar with his left leg first, pause and then commence his sermon."²² He would pay particular attention to the behaviour of his students, reminding them that "discipline and organisation" were central traits that would ensure success in their future life.²³ Sadegh Tabatabai, one of Khomeini's close supporters that accompanied him on the plane on his triumphant return to Tehran on 1 February 1979, adds in his recently published biography that Khomeini followed a careful dress code. In this particular anecdote, Khomeini made sure that his dark-blue socks matched the grey colour of his cloak, before he went to the mosque.²⁴ Tabatabai also indicates that Khomeini seemed to be a connoisseur of eau de toilette.²⁵ Beyond his disciplined demeanour then, there seemed to be whiffs of "worldliness" to Khomeini's character. At the same time, the "vaticanic" lifestyle in Qom, compounded by his similarly routinized life in exile in Najaf (1965–1978), must have made an indelible imprint on Khomeini, entrenching his clerical world view.

Throughout his life, Khomeini felt more comfortable in the religious confines of his circles and rather anxious about the secular realities encroaching on them. In particular, Qom was his centre of the universe, the imperial Vatican of the Shi'i that was waiting to be awakened to the calls of revolution. The efforts of Khomeini to politicise Qom bore fruit when, in January 1978,

demonstrators clashed with the Shah's security forces. "The religious centre in Qom has brought Iran back to life," he proudly proclaimed from the famed Sheikh Ansari mosque in Najaf. "The name of the religious centre in Qom will remain inscribed in history for all time. By comparison with Qom, we here in Najaf are dead and buried; it is Qom that has brought Islam back to life."²⁶ It should not come as a surprise, then, that after the revolution Khomeini immediately settled in Qom and proclaimed himself a "proud citizen" of the town.²⁷ The turbulent period immediately after the establishment of the Islamic Republic necessitated his return to Tehran, but it is not too far-fetched to argue that Khomeini regarded Qom as the real epicentre of religious activism and revolution both in Iran and throughout the Muslim world.

This socialisation of Khomeini into a senior cleric whose world view emerged relatively independent from competing secular institutions was possible because of a functioning institutional infrastructure that abetted the clerical class in Iran at least since the Safavid dynasty (1502–1736), which established Shi'i-Islam as the country's main national narrative. It was under the Safavids, and in particular during the rule of Shah Abbas I (1571–1629), when the idea of Imamite jurisprudence in the Twelver-Shi'i tradition was institutionalised in the burgeoning *madrasas* and other educational and civic institutions sponsored by the state which were increasingly populated by senior Shi'i scholars recruited from all over the Muslim world, in particular from Iraq, Syria and Lebanon. Chief among them was Muhaqiq al-Karaki (also al-Thani), a pivotal clerical personality that readily carried the torch of the state-sponsored Shi'ism institutionalised during that period. In his widely disseminated study, "Refuting the Criminal Invectives of Mysticism (Mata'in al Mufrimiya fi Radd al-Sufiya)," Al-Karaki established one of the most powerful refutations of the Sufi tradition in Iran and set the jurisprudential guidelines for the predominant authority of the jurist based on the Imamite succession.²⁸ As a consequence, the *usuli* (rationalist) school of Shi'i Islam increasingly dominated the seminaries and pushed back the followers of the traditionalist (*akhbari*) paradigm. Al-Karaki and other influential clerics emphasised the power of *ijtihad* or dialectical reasoning, and made a strong case in favour of the leadership of *mujtahids* whose divine decrees would be emulated (*taqlid*) by their followers.²⁹ As such, Al-Karaki's reinvention of a Shi'i orthodoxy based on a religious hierarchy dominated by a supreme jurist can be seen as one of the main precursors to Khomeini's idea of the *Velayat-e faqih* or the rule of the Supreme Jurisprudent.³⁰

Philosopher, Theologian, Revolutionary, Politician

My emphasis on a clerical world view needs to be qualified further now, for Khomeini was not merely a *mujtahid* that was born and raised within a society permeated by a thick fabric of religious norms and institutions, but a revolutionary cleric who rejected some of the same. For sure, no one is born a revolutionary. Indeed, in his first book, *Kashf-e Asrar (Discovery of Secrets)*, published in 1943, Khomeini did not totally reject the rule of the first Pahlavi monarch Reza Shah when he wrote that a superficial state is better than none at all.³¹ Neither was he particularly political during his years in Qom, at least in the initial years, always also careful to respect the prevalent hierarchies and the quietist leadership of Ayatollahs Haeri, and Ayatollah Hussein Boroujerdi – Iran's main *marja-e taqlid* from the end of the 1940s until his death in 1961. But *Kashf-e Asrar*, his first major political intervention, is a useful reference point because it unveils three major preferences of Khomeini's political thought that were to play a central role in praxis in the build-up to the revolution and after the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979.

First, although it is true that in *Kashf-e Asrar* Khomeini did not attack the monarchy in a

comparably explicit manner as he did in his lectures and speeches in the 1960s and 1970s, he did, even at this early stage, emphasise the centrality of the clergy to the supervision of any kind of earthly government. In an oft-cited sentence, he proclaimed that he “does not say that government must be in the hands of the *faqih*.”³² But this sentence must be read in accordance with the sections where Khomeini attributes absolute sovereignty to God and absolute legitimacy to Islamic governance which is compelled to safeguard implementation of the *shariah*: “The only government that reason accepts as legitimate and welcomes freely and happily is the government of God, Whose every act is just and Whose right it is to rule over the whole world and all the particles of existence.”³³ At once, Khomeini’s schooling in jurisprudence, philosophy and theology stands out when he speaks of governance, reason and religious legitimacy, respectively: “It is in contrast with the government of God that the nature of all existing governments becomes clear, as well as the sole legitimacy of Islamic government.”³⁴ The monarchy, and every other form of governance for that matter, is only legitimate for the time being and only if it accepts the sovereignty of God and the legitimate supervision of the religious leaders. It was quite apparent, judging from Khomeini’s distaste for the “court-clerics” who bowed to the Shah and the scathing and demeaning tone he reserved for the monarchy itself in *Kashf-e Asrar*, that he was not at all convinced that Reza Shah’s state was competent, or even interested in implementing those “most advanced laws in the world” which would “lead to the establishment of the Virtuous City.”³⁵

The reference of Khomeini to the establishment of the Virtuous City reveals a second aspect that permeates *Kashf-e Asrar*, and which can be identified as another constant in his political thought and praxis: namely, his schooling in and emphasis on philosophy. Terms such as “reason,” “justice,” “wisdom” and “oppression” are central to the political discourse of Khomeini throughout his life. They are indicative of his education in *hekmat* (literally, “wisdom”), and *irfan* (“gnosis”), taught to him by luminaries such as Mirza Mohammad Ali Shahabadi (d. 1950), a scholar of the classical Islamic philosophy of Ibn Sina (Avicenna), Ibn Arabi and Nassir al-Din Tusi.³⁶ The concept of the Virtuous City denotes an ideal and just polity, and entered political theory in Iran via the Platonic tradition in general and the classical Islamic philosophy of Farabi in particular.³⁷ Such a utopian “ideal order,” under the aegis of Islam, was exactly what Khomeini and his followers were striving for in Iran – hence the high costs that this “heavenly” project extracted from Iranian society.

Khomeini was an ardent student of philosophy, in particular the concept of *vahdat al-vojud* (unity of existence) and *tawheed* (unity of God) – conceptualised by Ibn Sina and Ibn Arabi – and, at a later stage, an enthusiastic lecturer on related themes in the seminaries of Qom.³⁸ The political aspects of this philosophical tradition in Iran that must have made the greatest impact on Khomeini, judging from the terms and methods permeating his discourse, are the quest for the ideal human being or *insane-e kamel* in Ibn Arabi’s words. The development of this ideal human being must be the prime objective of governance of the community and the leadership of the Supreme Jurisprudent, whose “exalted” position is not entirely remote from the “philosopher-king” in the Platonic tradition. So convinced was Khomeini of the superiority of classical Islamic philosophy that he urged the former leader of the Soviet Union – Mikhail Gorbachev – in a letter delivered to him in 1988, to study the Peripatetic philosophy of Farabi and Ibn Sina, the mysticism of Ibn Arabi, the transcendental philosophy of Mulla Sadra and the Ishraqi theosophy of Sohrawardi.³⁹ Gorbachev politely declined, but according to one Russian scholar, the message was widely distributed in the Soviet Union in the period of its disintegration in 1989–1990.⁴⁰

Ultimately, in truly modern fashion, Khomeini the politician and revolutionary eclipsed the abstract, contemplative and partially “non-Islamic” notions permeating the philosophy of the classical

philosophers in favour of a highly utilitarian, theological and interest-based interpretation. In the dialectic between philosophy and politics, Khomeini opted for the latter, especially in the 1960s when he focused his activities more stringently on combating the policies of the Shah. As such, it is not too far-fetched to argue that Ibn Arabi's emphasis on sainthood (*vilaya*) and his designation of the *vali* as a friend of God whose practices and devotion to knowledge of God enable him to claim succession to the Prophet, informed Khomeini's theory of *Velayat-e faqih*. But at the same time, Ibn Arabi and the Sufi tradition inspired by him would have rejected the positivistic (or ideological) certainty that Khomeini attached to the position of the *vali-e faqih* in favour of an individual path towards the "ideal human being."⁴¹ Not unlike other Islamists of his generation – Muhammad Ala Mawdudi in the subcontinent, Hassan al-Banna and Sayyid Qutb in Egypt, Ayatollah Mohammad Baqir al-Sadr in Iraq and others – Khomeini forged a particularly ideological interpretation of the role of Islam in politics and society. Confined were the abstract and contemplative ideas of the classical philosophers during the heydays of Muslim empires when Islam was not a contested ideational commodity. Ibn Sina, Farabi and Ibn Arabi did not have to proclaim Islam as the solution at every twist and turn of their discourse exactly because their Muslim identity, and the Islamic legitimation of the polity they lived in, was not threatened.⁴² The era of the postcolonial nation-state in the Muslim world changed all of that. It turned Islam into a contested ideational system and a space of immense contestation. Islam, being Muslim, after all, is also about identity, whether it is individual, religious and imperial or – since the break-up of the Ottoman Empire in the early twentieth century – national. As such, the organisational outfit of infant nation states, as opposed to the organically Islamic confessional empires of yesterday, gave centre stage to issues of governance and sovereignty in a way that was not apparent before. Enter the idea of a centralized state that would turn Islam at once into a source of legitimacy, sovereignty and national ideology. In short, in the twentieth century, Islam extended its purview into unchartered territories exactly because it was pasted by Khomeini and others onto the fabric of the modern nation state, a secular structure for which it has proven to be a loose fit.

Quite from the outset then, and this is the third constant we can distil from *Kashf-e Asrar*, the clerical world view that I have described so far was complemented and radicalised by a profoundly political and state-centric interpretation of the Imamite tradition in Iran. Here as well, Khomeini was a product of a historical dialectic: He lived through a tumultuous period in Iran's history. As a young orphan, he witnessed the tremors of the Constitutional Revolt (1906–1911) which established the first parliament in Iran; the subsequent coup d'état by Reza Khan in 1921 which institutionalised the Pahlavi dynasty; his deposition by the British in 1941; the MI6/CIA coup d'état which toppled Mohammad Mossadegh in 1953 and reinstated the dictatorship of the second Pahlavi Monarch – Mohammad Reza Shah – and his own revolt against the Shah's White Revolution in 1963. In addition to these fluctuations of the sovereignty and legitimacy of the state, and confrontational state-society relations, his was also a period of external domination of Iranian affairs which was exercised by the Russians and British in the early twentieth century, and after the Second World War increasingly by the United States. Khomeini witnessed the Shah's dependency on foreign support for its survival and the Pahlavis systematic programme of cultural westernization (delegated in truly authoritarian fashion from the top down) with awe. When, in 1964, the Shah granted legal immunity to U.S. citizens on Iranian territory, Khomeini criticized him with a famous, ironic allegory:

They have reduced the Iranian people to a level lower than that of an American dog. If someone runs over a dog belonging to an American, he will be prosecuted. Even if the Shah himself were to run over a dog belonging to an American, he would be prosecuted. But if an American cook runs over the Shah, the head of state, no one will have the right to interfere with him.⁴³

The political discourse of Khomeini reveals two central themes with regard to the historical context that he was embedded in: a particular emphasis on a strong state, and a profound focus on independence from foreign influences. He was under the firm impression that in the quest for a stable state and independence, especially from America, the role of Islam would be pivotal. At least in theory, the Supreme Jurisprudent resembles a Leviathan whose purpose it is to secure and stabilise the state and ensure the Islamicity of the system. To that end, Khomeini equipped the state with a dual legitimacy – religious and popular – with the former superseding the latter in terms of importance. The cornerstone of this theory of Islamic governance was that in the absence of the leadership of the Twelfth Imam of the Shi'i, the so called “occultation era,” only the “just jurists” are entitled to the permanent guardianship and governance of Muslim societies. Indeed, from the perspective of Khomeini, no government can be deemed “reasonable” if it is not based on the “divine law of god” executed by a “just and wise governor” who would ensure the stability of the state in the absence of the superior leadership of the Imams.⁴⁴ As he wrote in *Kashf-e Asrar*, undoubtedly with Reza Shah in mind: “Reason can never accept that a man who is no different from others in outward or inward accomplishments, unless he is maybe inferior to them, should have his dictates considered proper and just and his government legitimate, merely because he has succeeded in gathering around himself a gang to plunder the country and murder its people.”⁴⁵ Given that absolute sovereignty and absolute legitimacy is attributed to God and his divine law (*shariah*),⁴⁶ and that only the *mujtahideen* and – *primus inter pares* – the Supreme Jurisprudent have acquired superior knowledge of the political and religious criteria to establish an Islamic government, it is they who should be in charge of the guardianship of society.⁴⁷ In fact, they would lead the *umma* as representatives of the “infallible imams.” As such, any other form of governance is deemed “usurping”⁴⁸ and an interference in the sovereignty of God.⁴⁹

At the same time, the Vali-ye faqih does not merely claim divine sovereignty on behalf of the Islamic state, for he is also bound to public accountability. According to Khomeini, political leadership that is not based on the acceptance of the populace must be deemed illegitimate, even if it is “righteous.”⁵⁰ Ultimately then, he and his followers equipped the Islamic state in Iran with a dual prophylaxis against destabilisation. On the one hand, a sanctified legitimacy, on the other hand, a popular one: The Leviathan that Khomeini approved as the head of state in Iran is distinctly Janus Faced attached to a “sanctified” corpus and democratised underbelly. Until today, the Islamic Republic has not managed to bridge the intrinsic contradictions that this system provokes. As several authors argue in this study, Khomeini did not enter the revolution with an assured plan to institutionalise his theory of governance. He was, after all, a product of the revolutionary process that was driven by the Iranian people on the streets in their battles against the security forces of the Shah. But when Iranians finally overthrew the monarchy in 1979, Khomeini was catapulted into the position of leadership which he and his followers used in order to implement their vision of an ideal, Islamic order in Iran.

Certainly, for the hundreds of thousands who mourned the death of their Imam on 3 June 1989, Khomeini, who had convulsed their generation with such awesome vigour, would be remembered with an unbridled passion. Their chant, “Azast azast emrooz ruze azaast emrooz Khomeini-e bot shekan sahabe azast emrooz,” raised Khomeini almost to a prophetic status, likening the importance of his revolt to the smashing of the idols by the Prophet Mohammad in Mecca. Khomeini had seduced, in an unmistakably charismatic manner, a generation of Iranians whose rage and trepidation against the Shah caused one of the most earth-shattering revolutionary tremors of modernity. More than two decades after his death, the glow of the founder of the Islamic Republic suffuses all leaders of post-revolutionary Iran, and his legacy remains hotly debated, both inside the country and among the Iranian diaspora. There is no doubt that his persona continues to elicit strong reactions, both

among his loyal followers and his detractors: to many, his central role in the establishment of the Islamic Republic was an act of political genius; to many others it was an act of ultimate betrayal.

State of Scholarship and Plan of Book

It is the nature of giants to attract tall narratives. In Iran, there continues to exist a virtual “Khomeini industry,” a range of publishing houses and foundations that continuously produce books and studies about him that are distributed in several languages throughout the Muslim world and beyond. Khomeini’s portrait can be found on Iran’s currency, pictures of him adorn buildings from the inside and outside and there are several web pages dedicated to his legacy, including on social networking sites such as Facebook. Official numbers are hard to come by, but there are at least 250,000 studies published in Iran about him.⁵¹ His tomb, which is located between Tehran and Qom near Iran’s national cemetery Behesht-e Zahra (Paradise of Zahra), has been turned into a pilgrimage site and cultural centre headed by his grandson Hassan, whose political persuasion is very close to the reformist factions who want to democratize Iran’s theocratic institutions.⁵² It was recently linked to Tehran’s sprawling metro network and was strategically situated along one of Iran’s main highways leading up to the capital. Built in 1989 on a 5,000-acre development which continues to be tinkered with to date, the site is referred to as Haram-e Motahhar or “sacred shrine.” Khomeini’s sarcophagus (and that of his son, Ahmad Khomeini) is placed in a glass chamber with a polished-metal grilled enclosure and is encircled by eight massive marble columns and several more slender columns which support the space-frame ceiling and the gilded dome that overarches the structure. Equipped with polished marble floors and walls on the inside, the exterior of the shrine, with its golden dome and four slender minarets, makes it immediately visible from afar. There is then a well-framed Khomeini iconography in Iran, which continuously reproduces “Khomeinism” as a part of Iran’s contemporary political culture.⁵³

Earth-shaking though Khomeini’s role beyond Iran proved to be, there are very few books published outside of the country or the Arab and Muslim world that deal with his political thought from a scholarly perspective.⁵⁴ Compared to other revolutionary leaders with similar controversy surrounding their legacies – for instance, Lenin, Mao, Castro or Guevara – Khomeini is seriously under-researched, despite the clear and growing demand that Iran solicits, both in academia and the international media. In terms of pedagogical necessity and scholarly requirement, this is a rather unsatisfactory situation for researchers and students alike. The following chapters attempt to fill that gap by presenting beginnings for serious research on the subject matter. In fact, this is the first book on Khomeini that appreciates both the manifold facets of his political thought and the heterogeneous and eclectic historical context he was embedded in. Written by established and emerging scholars and interdisciplinary in scope and tone, the contributions reiterate that Khomeini was a complex figure; his political life and legacy cannot be subsumed under easily digestible formula.

In order to provide a first step towards a critical, scholarly understanding of his politics and period, the intricacies of his life and political thought that I could only touch on so sketchily in this introduction will be fleshed out further in the following thirteen chapters which are structured along three major themes: First, Khomeini and Iran before the revolution, with contributions that will clarify how Khomeini positioned himself politically throughout his life and in the build-up to the events in 1978/1979; second, Khomeini and the Islamic Republic, comprising six chapters on the role of Khomeini after the revolution and up until his death in 1989; and finally, the legacy of a revolutionary leader, with four sections discussing and exemplifying current debates about the post-

Khomeini period in Iran and beyond.

1 Ruhollah Khomeini, “In Commemoration of the Martyrs of Tehran, October 11, 1978”, in Hamid Algar (ed., trans.), *Islam and Revolution: Writings and Declarations of Imam Khomeini* (London: Mizan Press, 1981), pp. 240–241.

2 Seyyed Hamid Rouhani (Ziarati), *Baresi va tahlil az nehgate Imam Khomeini*, 11th edition, (Tehran: Entesharat-e Rahe Imam, 1360 [1982]), no page number.

3 The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, retrieved from <http://www.iranchamber.com/government/laws/constitution.php>, accessed 12 October 2012.

4 Ruhollah Khomeini, *Ain-e enghelab-e Islami: Gozidehai az andisheh va ara-ye Imam Khomeini* (Tehran: Moasses-ye tanzim va naschr-e assar-e Imam Khomeini, 1373 [1994]), p. 497.

5 Khomeini, *Islam and Revolution*, pp. 252–253.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 248.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 314.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 285.

9 On the making of Iran’s constitution, see also Asghar Shirazi, *The Constitution of Iran: Politics and the State in the Islamic Republic* (trans. John O’Kane), (London: I.B. Tauris, 1998).

[10](#) Khomeini, *Islam and Revolution*, p. 330.

[11](#) See further, Arshin Adib-Moghaddam, *Iran in World Politics: The Question of the Islamic Republic* (London/New York: Hurst/Oxford University Press, 2008). On the dialectic between power and resistance in the country, see Arshin Adib-Moghaddam, *On the Arab Revolts and the Iranian Revolution: Power and Resistance Today* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013) and Arshin Adib-Moghaddam, “What Is Radicalism: Power and Resistance in Iran”, *Middle East Critique*, Vol. 21, No. 1 (2012), pp. 271–290.

[12](#) Mohammad-Hossein Jamshidi (ed.), *Andishey-e siyasi-e imam Khomeini* (Tehran: Pajoheshkade-ye imam Khomeini va enghelabe islami, 1384 [2005]), pp. 245, 246.

[13](#) Mehdi Bazargan and his cabinet resigned during the hostage crisis and in protest of Iran’s deteriorating human rights situation at the beginning of the revolution. Abolhasan Bani Sadr was dismissed from the presidency in 1981 after being impeached by the Iranian parliament. He fled Iran into exile in 1981.

[14](#) Khomeini, *Islam and Revolution I*, p. 192.

[15](#) *Ibid.*, p. 197.

[16](#) *Ibid.*, p. 205.

[17](#) *Ibid.*, p. 298.

[18](#) It was Ayatollah Morteza Mutahhari, one of the closest clerical allies of Khomeini, who was adamant in stressing the centrality of the “clerical class” to the state and politics in Iran and who used the term even more forcefully in his influential books and talks at the famed Hosseiniyeh Ershad in Tehran, where he lectured together with Ali Shariati before the revolution. Mutahhari and Khomeini were particularly adamant about stressing that clerical leadership superseded intellectual leadership, whereas lay intellectuals such as Shariati were largely opposed to clerical governance. On Shariati, see the splendid book by Ali Rahnema, *An Islamic Utopian: A Political Biography of Ali Shariati* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1998). On Ayatollah Mutahhari and his focus on clerical leadership, see Mahmood T. Davari, *The Political Thought of Ayatollah Murtaza Mutahhari: An Iranian Theoretician of the Islamic State* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005), pp. 134–135.

[19](#) See Hamid Algar, “A Short Biography”, in Abdar Rahman Koya (ed.), *Imam Khomeini: Life, Thought and Legacy* (Petaling Jaya: Islamic Book, 2009), p. 19; and Baqer Moin, *Khomeini: Life of the Ayatollah* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1999), p. 2.

[20](#) For a recent introduction to Shi’i history and politics, see Hamid Dabashi, *Shi’ism: A Religion of Protest* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).

[21](#) Rouhani (Ziarati), *Baresi va tahlil az nehgate imam Khomeini*, p. 29.

[22](#) *Ibid.*, p. 30

[23](#) *Ibid.*, p. 30.

[24](#) Sadegh Tabatabai, *Khaterat-e siasi – ejtemai-ye doktor Sadegh Tabatabai, jelde aval*, vol. i, (Tehran: Mo’aseseh-ye chap va nashr-e oruj, 1387 [2008]), p. 156.

[25](#) *Ibid.*, pp. 155–156.

[26](#) Khomeini, *Islam and Revolution*, p. 218.

[27](#) Quoted in Algar, “A short biography”, p. 24. In the meantime, the clerical links in his life were reinforced by his marriage to Qods-e Iran Saqafai (or Qodsi) in 1929, the daughter of Ayatollah Mirza Mohammad Saqafi. The marriage lasted until Khomeini’s death in 1989.

[28](#) See further, Rula Jurdi Abisaab, *Converting Persia: Religion and Power in the Safavid Empire* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2004), p. 24. For Karaki’s writings, see Muhaqiq al-Karaki, *Jameal maqasid*, vol. 2 (Qum: Ahlol Bayt Publication, 1365 [1986]).

[29](#) See further, Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi, *The Divine Guide in Early Shi’ism: The Sources of Esotericism in Islam* (trans. David Streight), (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), pp. 138–139.

[30](#) For a full history of the idea of *marjaiyat*, see Abdulaziz Abdulhussein Sachedina, *The Just Ruler in Shi’ite Islam: The Comprehensive Authority of the Jurist in Imamite Jurisprudence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998); and Linda Walbridge, *The Most Learned of the Shi’a: The Institution of the Marja’ Taqlid* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), in particular pp. 1–12.

[31](#) Ruhollah Khomeini, *Kashf-e Asrar* (Qom: Azadi Publications, no date), p. 180.

[32](#) Khomeini, *Islam and Revolution*, p. 170.

[33](#) *Ibid.*, p. 170.

[34](#) *Ibid.*, p. 170.

[35](#) [Ibid.](#), p. 170.

[36](#) For a detailed account of the linkage between Ibn Arabi and Khomeini, see Latife Reda Ali, *Khomeini's Discourse of Resistance: The Discourse of Power of the Islamic Revolution* (PhD thesis, London: School of Oriental and African Studies 2012).

[37](#) On the impact of Farabi and Ibn Sina on Islamic political thought, see Arshin Adib-Moghaddam, *A Metahistory of the Clash of Civilisations: Us and Them Beyond Orientalism* (London/New York: Hurst/Oxford University Press, 2011).

[38](#) Moin, *Life of the Ayatollah*, pp. 40 ff.

[39](#) [Ibid.](#), pp. 274–276.

[40](#) See Alexander Knysh, “*Irfan* Revisited: Khomeini and the Legacy of Islamic Mystical Philosophy”, *The Middle East Journal*, Vol. 64, No. 4 (1992), p. 652 (footnote 81).

[41](#) See further, William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn Al-Arabi's Metaphysics of Imagination* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989).

[42](#) See further, Adib-Moghaddam, *A Metahistory of the Clash of Civilisations*, p. 246. On Farabi's political thought, see Muhsin S. Mahdi, *AlFarabi and the Foundation of Islamic Political Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

[43](#) Khomeini, *Islam and Revolution*, p. 182.

[44](#) Ruhollah Khomeini, *Shou'n va Ekhtiyarate Valiye Faqih* (Tehran: Vezarat-e Ershade Islami, 1986), pp. 29–30.

[45](#) Khomeini, *Islam and Revolution*, p. 169.

[46](#) Ruhollah Khomeini, *Al Makaseb al Muharrama*, vol. ii, (Tehran: The Institute for Compilation and Publication of Imam Khomeini's Work, 1995), p. 160.

[47](#) Khomeini, *Sahifeh-ye Nur*, vol. x, p. 308.

[48](#) Khomeini, *Sahifeh-ye Nur*, vol. xi, p. 403.

[49](#) Khomeini, *Al Makaseb al Muharrama*, vol. ii, p. 160.

[50](#) Khomeini, *Sahifeh-ye Nur*, vol. v, p. 244.

[51](#) *Fars News Agency*, 12.03.1386 [2007]. Retrieved from <http://www.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=8603110187>. Accessed 12 August 2012.

[52](#) Two granddaughters of Khomeini, namely Zahra Eshraghi and Naiemeh Eshraghi – two ardent Facebook users – have repeatedly expressed their support for the reformist demands for democracy and human rights in Iran. Both have launched campaigns against the compulsory veiling of women. For a recent, comprehensive overview of women's voices in Iran, see Tara Povey and Elaheh Rostami-Povey (eds.), *Women, Power and Politics in 21st century Iran* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012).

[53](#) On the term “Khomeinism”, see further, Ervand Abrahamian, *Khomeinism: Essays on the Islamic Republic* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

[54](#) For notable exceptions beyond the references already cited, see Dustin Byrd, *Ayatollah Khomeini and the Anatomy of the Islamic Revolution in Iran* (London: University Press of America, 2011); and Vanessa Martin, *Creating an Islamic State: Khomeini and the Making of a New Iran* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1993).

1 Khomeini and the “White Revolution”

Fakhreddin Azimi

The Emergence of Combative Clerical Activism

Ruhollah Khomeini belonged to a generation of clerics who had been deeply affected and antagonized by the policies of Reza Shah Pahlavi, which had sought to undermine the sociopolitical influence of the clergy.¹ At the same time, Khomeini was a product of the traditional religious and educational milieu of the seminary (*hawza*) established in the shrine city of Qom by the quietist Ayatollah Abdolkarim Ha’eri-Yazdi, who was permitted to do so by the Shah. The Qom seminary – the Iranian counterpart to the one in Najaf, Iraq – enabled the beleaguered Iranian clerics to retain their residual institutionalized social power and enhance their capacity for self-perpetuation and the reproduction of their cultural capital.

The ease of political restrictions in the aftermath of Reza Shah’s abdication in 1941 and the rise of secular and particularly leftist ideologies that provoked the anxieties of the traditional classes provided the clerics with an opportunity to reassert themselves. They attempted unsuccessfully to secure a formal reversal of some of Reza Shah’s policies, particularly the banning of the veil in public. Efforts toward this end by Ayatollahs such as Hossein Qomi – who appeared to enjoy the goodwill of the new Shah, Mohammad Reza – bore insufficient fruit. The emergence of the Tudeh Party, however, despite its professions of respect for religious sensibilities, alerted the traditionalists and other anti-leftists to the utility of religion as an antidote to secular trends. Traditionalists such as Sayyed Zia al-Din Tabataba’i, the Anglophile former prime minister, had a penchant for religious sentiments or at least utilized them for instrumental, utilitarian purposes. Against the background of growing anti-imperialist nationalism, the Tudeh Party was hampered by its affiliation to the Soviet Union; civic-nationalism, increasingly associated with the National Front and particularly the name of Mohammad Mosaddeq, was on the rise. Advocating national intellectual-ideological autonomy and political independence, the Front sought to establish constitutional government and secure Iranian sovereign rights over the country’s oil resources and industry.

The intellectual character and tenor of the civic-nationalist movement was cautiously but unmistakably secular, yet it enjoyed the support of certain politically minded senior clerics such as Ayatollah Abolqasem Kashani, who saw himself as one of its pillars. Grand Ayatollah Hossein Borujerdi – the quietist, politically astute but socioculturally conservative supreme religious authority in the country, or the sole *marja-e taqlid* (‘source of emulation for the faithful’) – refrained from avowedly supporting or opposing the movement. Based in Qom and heading the clerical establishment since February 1947, Borujerdi carefully pursued a policy of concerned non-involvement vis-à-vis the government of Mosaddeq (1951–1953) and its relations with the Shah. Kashani, on the other hand, abandoned Mosaddeq in the second half of 1952 and actively joined the royalists – a move which irretrievably damaged his social standing. The spectacle of a leading cleric, Kashani, losing to a secular political leader, Mosaddeq, appears to have left an indelible mark on Khomeini, then an eminent teacher at the Qom seminary. Thereafter, Khomeini’s attitude to Mosaddeq and his legacy remained one of lingering, barely disguised aversion.

From the outset, Khomeini regarded the clergy as the self-evident intellectual-spiritual leaders of society. According to one scholar who knew him closely, Khomeini disapproved of Kashani's support for the civic-nationalist movement.² The National Front, in Khomeini's view, was an adversary that should not have been allowed to tap the clerics' symbolic capital and social ties with the masses to enhance its influence. Khomeini was politically close to traditionalists such as Ayatollah Mohammad Behbahani,³ who believed that monarchy was more disposed than any alternative regime to respect the interests and concerns of the clergy, and check secularizing trends. The clerics needed to maintain links with the monarchy to control or influence it, thereby ensuring that it remained responsive to their demands and expectations.

For the clerics in general, the Iranian state, being the sole Shi'i polity in the world, entailed a particular emotional salience; necessitating its protection from the lurking dangers of communism, civic-nationalism, republicanism, and modernity as well as indiscriminating autocracy. The Shah sought to benefit from clerical goodwill, habitually presenting himself as enjoying the blessings and protection of the Shi'i Imams and committed to safeguarding the Shi'i character of Iranian society. He considered the support of the clergy useful not only in combating communism, but also in deflecting the pressure of civic-nationalism. In his confrontation with the civic-nationalists, the Shah enjoyed the support of most senior clerics, who were apprehensive of communism, republicanism, and secularism. In the course of the Anglo-American-instigated coup of 1953, the two leading non-seminarian clerics, Behbahani and Kashani, openly sided with the royalist camp. Borujerdi also eventually abandoned his neutrality and sided with the Shah upon learning that the royalist forces had succeeded. As long as the Shah had not acquired autocratic power, he could invoke his lack of firm control over the political process as a ploy to defuse pressure from the clerics and justify his inaction regarding their demands. He appeared responsive to their expectations, of which they were appreciative, but essentially they cared more about the institution of the monarchy than the incumbent monarch. Their chief political concern continued to be the preservation of the monarchy within the implicitly defined parameters of Shi'i Islam. This required the maintenance of traditional channels of communication and modalities of negotiation and mediation that would ensure that the state remained unable or unwilling to ignore or subdue the clerics, or to promote agendas detrimental to their concerns or interests.

With its pursuit of a vociferous and violent agenda at odds with Borujerdi's prudent approach, the Fedaiyan-e Islam had aroused his exasperation and opposition. This in turn provoked them not to hesitate in harassing him. According to an informed account, the suspicion that Khomeini incited the group strained and practically terminated Borujerdi's relations with him, despite his earlier record of having enjoyed Borujerdi's trust and confidence.⁴ A letter to Borujerdi from Khomeini and others implicitly questioning his attitude to the Constituent Assembly of 1949 had brought a terse response from Borujerdi.⁵ However, prior to the rift over the Fedaiyan and other issues, Khomeini enjoyed close ties with Borujerdi. Reportedly regarded for some time as his "foreign minister," Khomeini met the Shah on Borujerdi's behalf at least once.⁶ The complex of sentiments that animated the Fedaiyan resonated with Khomeini, and his single-mindedness appealed to their brand of activism. To their generic Islamism he added a keen awareness of the utility of invoking constitutional and inclusive causes, and the necessity of enlisting public support. With the suppression of the Fedaiyan in the mid-1950s, many Islamists who continued to adhere to the group's socioreligious vision would gradually come to see Khomeini as their spiritual guide and leader. However, the clerical establishment, broadly loyal to the legacy of Borujerdi, shunned the outlook and conduct promoted by the Fedaiyan. This attitude, together with the absence of widespread receptivity to strident Islamist positions in Iranian society, barred the group and its offshoots from developing an extensive

following or acquiring a populist character.

Beholden to the clergy's support during the coup of 1953 and in need of their continued cooperation, which indirectly implied popular backing for his rule, the Shah felt vulnerable to pressure from the clerics and obliged to concede to some of their demands. An issue that could be used by the clerics to test and enhance the regime's proclaimed commitment to safeguarding the official faith was its attitude to Baha'ism. Opposing any trend construed as a threat to the interests of Shi'ism as the official religion of the state, Borujerdi condoned the anti-Baha'i campaign of the spring of 1955, but urged restraint and non-violence. Acquiescing in the campaign, which was spearheaded by Mohammad-Taqi Falsafi, a preacher-publicist with a rousing oratorical flair who acted in the name of Borujerdi,² the regime did not immediately appreciate the political implications of galvanizing the society or enhancing the clerical profile. It was preoccupied with plans to formalize its pro-Western ties by joining the Baghdad Pact – an unpopular move among various groups in Iran, including the Fedaiyan, which resulted in an assassination attempt on the life of Prime Minister Hossein Ala in mid-November. This in turn was followed by the execution of a number of Fedaiyan leaders two months later.

By acquiescing in the anti-Baha'i campaign, the regime had underlined its Shi'i loyalties, thereby strengthening its links with the clerics. It had sought to divert attention from its open abandonment of Iran's traditional preference for a neutralist foreign policy; it had also shown that it would rather have clerical energy focused on opposing the Baha'is than the regime itself. Clouding but not overly straining relations between the Shah and Borujerdi, the anti-Baha'i campaign subsided as the regime realized its adverse impact on its own position. But the imperative of maintaining and strengthening ties with the Shi'i establishment persisted, receiving a boost following the revolution of 1958 in Iraq that overthrew the monarchy. As long as Borujerdi was alive and alert, he was able and had the moral authority and skills to maintain a *modus vivendi* with the regime, preventing it from resorting to policies he deemed incompatible with or detrimental to the status of Shi'ism, his own position, and the expectations the faithful had of him as the sole *marja'*. Borujerdi's authority also checked rivalry among ambitious clerics and any precipitous attempt to flout the rules of political conduct he had carefully established. Far from being in a position to alienate Borujerdi or act in open defiance of the clerical estate, the regime was cognizant of the significance of enjoying clerical support in the face of potential dangers.

By the early 1960s, it had become evident that the handling of the much-vitiated but not entirely subdued parliamentary and electoral processes, as well as press freedom, continued to haunt the regime. It had vacillated between reducing constitutionalism to a mere façade and allowing it a modicum of credibility. It had remained unable to tolerate any degree of meaningful electoral freedom, nor was it able to openly abandon its claims or promises regarding its commitment to constitutional formalities. A lingering crisis resulting from the Shah's failure to engineer a parliament at once pliable and credible eventually led him to suspend the constitutional process in May 1961. More than a year later, having discarded the man who had helped set this process in motion – Prime Minister Ali Amini – the Shah decided to consolidate his position as the undisputed decision maker and agenda-setter in the body politic by donning the mantle of development and modernization. This required concentrating increasing power in his own hands and undermining any other actual or potential loci of power and sources of challenge. Resorting to a program of social engineering (i.e., state-sponsored socioeconomic development) could help compensate for and justify his authoritarian conduct in the eyes of the domestic and international – mainly American – audience.

The Shah's envisaged role required subduing actual or potential opponents and encroaching upon

the privileges of socially anchored status groups such as the clerics. Cautious steps in this direction had been taken some time earlier. The government had, for instance, started to take part in the training of preachers through the theology faculty of Tehran University in competition with the seminaries. As one observer maintained, the purpose was “to control and use the religious classes for its own ends, the result of which is likely to strengthen the existing tyranny, and ultimately to weaken the religious institutions.”⁸ The government had also begun to promote a program of land reform and take up the issue of gender inequality. Despite his increasing frailty, Borujerdi had, however, succeeded in considerably diluting a parliamentary bill for land distribution. He had also effectively thwarted any serious consideration of female enfranchisement. With Borujerdi’s death in late March 1961, the Shah no longer felt constrained to delay his plans.

Following Borujerdi’s death, no single cleric could be readily identified as possessing comparable authority and symbolic capital. Any senior cleric who demonstrated the requisite learning and piety, and had a body of published works including the obligatory manual of practice (*resaleh*) for the guidance of the faithful, was potentially eligible to become a *marja*’. In addition to demonstrated comprehensive knowledge in Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*), a likely candidate had to possess the quality of character to command the assent of learned peers and disciples. He also had to have an appreciable following, as well as adequate financial resources – provided by the faithful – to sustain a sizeable body of students. Several senior clerics in Iran as well as Iraq could be regarded as viable candidates to take up Borujerdi’s mantle. Among the most prominent in Qom were Ayatollahs Mohammad-Reza Golpayegani, Kazem Shari’atmadari, and Shahab al-Din Mar’ashi-Najafi. The competition to succeed Borujerdi, although often severe and bitter, had to be publicly restrained, subtle, and dignified. Intensely egocentric individuals had to be seen to be cooperating to preserve and amplify the legacy of Borujerdi and his skillful stewardship of Qom’s religious educational establishment.

Upon Borujerdi’s death, and intending to influence the process of succession, the Shah sent a telegram of condolences to Ayatollah Mohsen Hakim (al-Hakim), who resided in Iraq. This gesture unmistakably indicated the Shah’s preference for Hakim as the most deserving successor, over clerics residing in Iran. As an outsider, Hakim was regarded as less likely or able than several of his peers in Iran to act assertively or challenge the policies of the Iranian state. Moreover, as the U.S. embassy maintained, the Shah wanted “to rid himself of the annoyance of an alternative focus of loyalty for the masses.”⁹ In addition to preferring a leading cleric outside Iran, the Shah also wanted to see religious authority fragmented and acquiring a regional character.¹⁰ However, as reported by the Shah’s security services (SAVAK), there were concerns in certain quarters that the transfer of Shi’i leadership from Iran was not without its disadvantages, as, among other things, it reduced the government’s control over the clerical class and weakened its influence in the Shi’i world.¹¹

Among possible contenders for Borujerdi’s mantle, Khomeini had shown a stoic indifference to ongoing attempts to influence the succession through conventional modalities. His chances were limited, as he had not published his manual of practice – a key prerequisite of being regarded as a source of emulation – and had to be persuaded to allow his disciples to arrange its publication.¹² Regarded as an introvert and aloof mentor whom few students dared to cross,¹³ he had gained a reputation as a learned teacher of such unconventional topics as mysticism and Islamic philosophy, which he taught in his early years at the seminary, as well as the more traditional Islamic legal theory and Islamic law. There were, however, other senior clerics who were far better placed, enjoying considerable financial resources, sizeable followings, and suitable public relations. Khomeini seemed reluctant to play a prominent role in organizing commemorations for Borujerdi, as his possible heirs

were expected to do, and had to be persuaded to join the leading clerics in this task.¹⁴ He also took no part in meeting the financial burden of running the seminary, which faced large debts incurred by Borujerdi.

Khomeini had long envisaged an active role for the *ulema*. He essentially regarded them as undisputed spiritual and moral guides, uniquely qualified to enjoin the public good, and entitled to the deference of all believers including the Shah. His 1944 polemical work, *Kashf-e Asrar* (*Secrets Revealed*), written in response to the intellectual challenges facing Shi'ism during the time of Reza Shah, contained an incipient version of his later political cosmology. With a tone which was emphatic, self-assured, angry, and simultaneously denunciatory and defensive, Khomeini castigated Reza Shah, and described the elimination of clerical influence as his “greatest mistake.”¹⁵ Espousing an unequivocally anti-secular stand, he advocated the subordination of politics to religion and politicians to clerics. Governance, he maintained, must rest on divine laws, and this requires clerical supervision.¹⁶ Islamic law is permanent and all-inclusive, and Islam has “refuted all secular laws emanating from the syphilitic brains of a handful of senseless (*bi-kherad*) people.”¹⁷ The residual influence of his antagonists, chiefly Ahmad Kasravi, permeated Khomeini's language, with the word *kherad* (“reason”) recurring as a constant refrain. He readily, albeit selectively, adopted the vocabulary of his antagonists to refute or denounce the substance of their thought. However, despite the unconventional inquisitiveness, borrowed idiom, appeal to “reason,” rhetoric of self-reliance, and flair for argumentation, Khomeini's understanding of the modern world as revealed in this work was noticeably narrow. For instance, he still saw the need to defend what he described as “Greek” medicine (*tebb-e yunani*), by which he meant traditional medicine, in contrast to the modern medical sciences.¹⁸

When actively entering the political fray to oppose the Shah in the 1960s, Khomeini's statements, declarations, and obiter dicta – particularly regarding the status and role of women – reproduced some of the most conventional traditional beliefs and anxieties. For him, the employment of women was conducive to little more than “bureaucratic paralysis” and “turmoil.”¹⁹ Gender equality, in his view, contravened essential Islamic ordinances, resulted in “dishonoring chaste women and shaming the Iranian nation,” and would culminate in the conscription of “eighteen year old girls,” which was tantamount to “forcing the young and chaste women at bayonet point into prostitution.”²⁰ His oratorical skills and tactics, together with his demeanor and tone, often enabled him to mask the ordinary as oracular or enigmatic, and give inspiring flavor to unexceptional conventional wisdom. In many of his pronouncements, ideas that could appeal to the religious literalist and pious believers could be found alongside views that resonated with even some of the more savvy opponents of the Shah. He often cushioned inflexibility with equivocations open to a variety of interpretations. A stern moralism on gender issues and sociopersonal freedoms was combined with forceful professions of opposition to tyranny and adherence to constitutional principles and the rights and liberties they entailed. Nor was he averse to invoking a politics of fear, emphasizing not only the dire consequences of the erosion of female chastity but also foreign domination and xenophobia. The dangers posed by Israel, America, Jews, and Baha'is; the indignity of foreign subjugation and the consequent loss of honor and authenticity dotted many of his pronouncements, serving as leitmotifs for mobilizing support or prejudicial sentiments. No doubt some of these references were calculated and tactical, but it is likely that he believed in the dangers he repeatedly invoked.

Khomeini's rhetoric was often ambivalent, or flexible enough to allow a multiplicity of interpretations of Islam itself. His understanding of Islam did not always correspond with the conceptions of all those who sympathized with him. More significantly, a persistent culture of

secularity in Iranian politics and society had long been taken for granted. This process had been helped by the predominance of clerical quietism, the absence of a widespread Islamist movement and the non-existence of a realistic perception of clerics as potential or feasible rulers or as harboring political ambition to govern. As a corollary to this, assumptions about what Islam could politically entail remained ambiguous or indeterminate. The understanding of Islam itself was invariably specific to different life experiences.

In a political climate characterized by the coercive silencing of opposition, Khomeini's fortitude, sustained by a self-righteous tenacity of purpose, not only set him apart but also often overshadowed the content of his pronouncements. In contrast to the news of his defiant gestures, the substance of his utterances and his politically charged writings rarely reached a wide audience. With the aim of countering accusations of political partisanship or the misgivings of the conservative *ulema*, Khomeini avoided identification with any political group or party. This included those whose ideas might have partially appealed to him, including the Freedom Movement led by Mehdi Bazargan.²¹ As a man with an instinctive grasp of the psychology of leadership, Khomeini fully understood that resistance in an authoritarian context would invariably be viewed as righteous; that regardless of its content and motives, it resonated with all those who had reason to be disgruntled.

Conceiving a special status for the clerics as providers of binding moral and juridical guidance for the rulers was intrinsic to Khomeini's vision of Islam. He was also mindful of a long-ignored constitutional clause envisaging clerical supervision of the legislative process. Whether such supervision was compatible with the implications of the indivisible authority of the modern state, popular sovereignty, or the imperative of political and civic equality essential to meaningful constitutionalism, was of little concern to Khomeini. Nor was he sufficiently cognizant of the intricacies and demands of life in the modern world. Invariably and simply equating progress with techno-scientific advances and without due attention to the intellectual and institutional underpinnings of a coherent notion of modernity, he was overly sensitive to the charge of being a regressive opponent of change. Decrying Iran's technological backwardness and dependence on foreigners, he self-consciously rejected the label "reactionary," applied to him by his royalist and other opponents. He redefined reactionary to connote specifically opposition to modern technology, thereby excluding himself and Islam in general. Without abandoning his main refrains revolving around Islam as panacea, he shifted his focus to broader topics, broaching a wider vision and set of issues. Aiming to euphemize or underemphasize his opposition to reform, he concentrated on issues of legality and constitutionality. He did so in the knowledge that the appropriation of constitutionalist causes would broaden his appeal and the Shah would be acutely vulnerable to them.

In October 1962, when a cabinet decree regarding the election of district and provincial councils provoked vociferous clerical protest, Khomeini had the opportunity to make his mark on the politics of Iran. The decree had not underlined the imperative of adherence to Islam in reference to voters and candidates; a clause pertaining to the oath to be taken by elected candidates had referred to "holy books" rather than specifying the Quran and it had also implicitly extended the franchise to women. The issue of enfranchising women (initially at the level of local councils) had been in the air since 1952 and was advocated by Mosaddeq and his supporters, but had provoked clerical and conservative opposition. It was quietly taken up by Prime Minister Amini, and his successor, Asadollah Alam, formally promulgated it. Having been adopted during the prolonged parliamentary hiatus resulting from the dissolution of both houses of parliament in May 1961, the bill's legal status was tenuous. Nor, as it turned out, was the government resolutely committed to it. Protesting that the measure was aimed at undermining Islam, a large number of senior clerics, including the normally pro-regime Behbahani, demanded its cancellation.

Khomeini played a leading role in exerting pressure on both the government and the Shah, as well as exhorting other *ulema* not to relent in their demands for the revocation of the bill. This earned him not only the ire of the regime, but also growing public attention. According to SAVAK, Khomeini had no record of prior opposition to the regime or other political activity, except for anticommunism.²² But he rapidly emerged as a relentless opponent of the government. The Shah responded to the written appeals of other senior clerics but ignored Khomeini,²³ intending to snub and marginalize him. This attitude, however, proved beneficial to Khomeini. Attempts to isolate him by announcing that other senior clerics disagreed with him impelled them to act in his support more conspicuously.²⁴ Khomeini saw the regime as intent on seeking to free itself from any clerically sustained constraints on its policies, viewing itself as capable of such a venture and any consequent confrontation. In Khomeini's view, the regime's attitude implied an intolerable belittling of the *ulema* and a regard for them as a spent force. Attributing this partly to the vacuum in clerical leadership caused by Borujerdi's death, Khomeini saw himself as bound by religious duty to counteract.

By challenging both the quietism of the leading *ulema* and the encroachments of the regime, and seeking to defend Shi'ism from what he deemed a determined onslaught by the state, Khomeini had chosen an unconventional path to prominence and preeminence. He proved himself adept at combining characteristic clerical elitism with inventive populism tinged with bluntly expressed belligerence. He seemed convinced that whoever showed himself willing to act and speak most forcefully and fearlessly in defense of religious values and principles could expect to gain the attention and support of a weightier segment of the faithful. As such conduct involved challenging the regime openly, it also impressed certain components of the secular/lay opposition who saw themselves as increasingly unable to confront the regime effectively. By addressing a confluence of concerns, interests, and principles that overlapped with those of many secular opponents of the Shah, Khomeini could portray himself as a defender of constitutional governance.

Unconcerned that his peers might perceive his vociferousness as calculatedly aimed at self-promotion, Khomeini presented himself as a selfless defender of the clergy, not only as custodians of the official religion but also as defenders of national independence.²⁵ Mindful of social pressures and expectations, and the requirements of clerical solidarity, many clerics were unable to remain indifferent to the policies of the regime; nor could they fail to back Khomeini, or openly break ranks with him. They were also not able or willing to support his activism indefinitely. Spectacles of clerical solidarity often masked deep personal rifts and rivalries. Moreover, Khomeini's confrontationist demeanor seemed anomalous to the political conduct befitting Borujerdi's legacy and those wishing to uphold it. Some of Khomeini's peers viewed his defiant stance vis-à-vis the state as counterproductive and harmful to the overriding imperative of orderly education in the Qom seminary. They regretted the abandonment of the carefully modulated approach cultivated by Borujerdi in avoiding belligerent encounters. However, despite the underlying reservations of some senior clerics about the outcome of open opposition to the Shah, Khomeini remained undaunted.²⁶

Opposing any measure that contravened Islamic principles, Khomeini avoided giving or reinforcing the impression that his objections were to reform, per se. He tried to downplay or disguise his disapproval of the enfranchisement of women and was careful to invoke constitutional issues frequently.²⁷ He knew that such issues commanded a wide consensus, as the Shah was unable to justify his autocratic control or leadership of reform on constitutional grounds. Cognizant of the clerics' role in the prelude to the Constitutional Revolution of 1906, Khomeini realized that opposing the Shah on any grounds could be construed as opposing dictatorship. Khomeini did not oppose the Shah because his dictatorial measures contravened the principles of constitutional democracy, but

because he feared that growing dictatorship would involve the marginalization and neutralization of social forces such as the clerics. The unchecked expansion of state power, as Khomeini had witnessed during Reza Shah's era, would uproot the influence of the clerics as the spokesmen of large segments of the Iranian populace, unleash secularizing trends, and undermine the capacity of the clerics to maintain and reproduce their ideological power and cultural capital.

Cumulative clerical pressure eventually forced the cabinet of Alam to rescind the decree some two months after its promulgation. The inept handling of the issue by the regime and its retreat emboldened clerics such as the increasingly assertive Khomeini. The episode provided the clerics with an opportunity to test the government's resolve; it demonstrated the vulnerability of the regime and the powerful impact of mobilized clerical solidarity.²⁸ But preparing to launch his reform program – the White Revolution – and embittered by the setback, the Shah soon went on the offensive and pressed ahead with his plans, despite the misgivings of even Alam.²⁹ For the Shah, the reformist agenda was not only socially desirable but vital for the justification of his preponderant political role both domestically and in the eyes of his American backers. Having vacillated about whether to press the Shah for constitutional concessions or demand social reform, the Kennedy administration eventually concluded that constitutionalism was effectively impractical and incompatible with stability in Iran. Abandoning any consideration of not backing the Shah, they regarded socioeconomic reform as more practical and congenial with his leanings as well as conducive to the strengthening of the regime.³⁰ The backing of the United States and increased self-confidence led the Shah to push forward with the White Revolution – a process that involved casting aside traditional classes previously regarded as indispensable for the stability of the realm and continuation of the monarchy.

It was assumed that enhanced foreign backing, the growing military and security forces, and expanding technocratic elite had rendered redundant the regime's former domestic backers such as landowners, clerics, and traditional street leaders. Moreover, the regime – and specifically, the Shah – hoped to gain the active support of the peasantry who were acquiring land, as a substitute for the relinquished backing of former supporters. Envyng the popularity of Hasan Arsanjani, the agriculture minister and moving spirit behind the land reform, the Shah told the British ambassador that he was “determined” that no one, particularly Arsanjani, “shall be out ahead of him in courting the newly emancipated peasantry, representing 75% of the population.”³¹ With this aim in mind he resorted to populist gestures and assumed a role for which he was temperamentally ill-equipped. More significantly, he was unable in this new role to invoke any constitutionally sustainable justification to counter the arguments of opponents (clerical or lay) including the supporters of Mosaddeq, who had revived the National Front.

The White Revolution signified the growing intrusion of the state in the spheres of influence of socially privileged groups such as the clergy. Such intrusion, discreet or otherwise, was, of course, not new. However, it assumed a new intensity as the government pressed ahead with its program of addressing issues such as gender inequality and land distribution. In their attitude to land distribution, the clerics faced the dilemma of how to oppose the measure and avoid identification with the privileged and exploiting classes. The clerics resented the attempts of the state to subvert the traditional order of life and its underlying normative codes, nor could they fail to view the authoritarian trajectory of the state as anything but detrimental to their own status and influence. As the chief component of the urban notables, the landowners, together with the *ulema*, had long acted as intermediaries between the state and rural and urban masses, and had tried to counter the state's domineering tendencies. They not only resented the erosion of their political clout, but abhorred the violation of property rights. They feared that the intensified momentum of the land reform would

jeopardize the property rights not only of large land owners but also of small holders. The clerics also feared losing their control over piously endowed lands. In the autumn of 1962, the government announced that the rights of small land owners would not be infringed, and income from charitable endowments would be safeguarded; but it failed to reassure its opponents.

With few exceptions, the clerics – discreetly or otherwise – opposed the land reform. They also generally abhorred the enfranchisement of women, considering it a serious threat to the religiously sanctioned norms of female chastity and domesticity and a prelude to unstoppable secularization. As a component of the Shah’s reform program, in early 1963 the franchise was finally extended to women. This measure, demanded for some years by groups of urban women, was a socially significant and long overdue step. But its immediate significance was vitiated by the eroded credibility of the electoral process. In seeking to gain popular support and legitimacy for his program through a referendum, scheduled for January 26, 1963, the Shah ignored the fact that Mosaddeq’s resort to a referendum to dissolve the parliament in 1953 had been widely condemned by his royalist opponents. In the wake of failed attempts by the clerics to dissuade the Shah through appeals and mediation, and as a direct challenge to the Shah, on January 21 Khomeini denounced and boycotted the referendum. Other political forces such as the National Front would also boycott it. In response to his clerical opponents, and having personally traveled to Qom four days later, the Shah denounced them as “black reactionaries” leading a parasitic existence (*moftkhari*).

Such a gesture by the Shah in the stronghold of Iranian Shi’ism could not go unanswered. It was clear that the regime had abandoned its previous restraints. Determined to respond, Khomeini plausibly assumed that he could act with relative impunity; that the regime would treat its senior clerical opponents less harshly than the secular. A commensurate response from Khomeini was bound to raise his stature, which would in turn reduce his vulnerability and force reluctant clerics to heed public expectations and pressures and back him, affirm his leadership, and follow him. Khomeini’s brinkmanship in confronting the regime enhanced his prominence beyond any accolade that traditional learning could bestow. He knew that the price he was likely to pay earned him a moral authority not ordinarily within reach. For him, surviving confrontation with the regime would be a success; his victimization was likely to hurt the regime. He was provoked by the regime but also propelled by the momentum generated by his own outspokenness.

The regime could not have failed to realize that targeting Khomeini would add to his popularity and prestige, but inaction seemed equally damaging. The Shah not only intensified the propaganda campaign to counter clerics such as Khomeini, but ordered the conscription of clerical students. However, verbal attacks and other forms of abuse against the clerics contravened convention and in no way helped the regime’s cause. The harassment and extralegal measures it resorted to only underlined the resonance of Khomeini’s arguments regarding the absence of constitutionalism and a credible legal framework. Such an absence accounted for the Shah’s newly assumed role, which was irreconcilable with the ostensibly nonpartisan position that monarchs customarily attempted to cultivate. In promoting his “revolutionary” cause, and acting as its moving spirit, the Shah had embarked upon a project that militated against the spirit of monarchy as a traditional institution anchored in conservative forces and ascriptive values. Making himself the target of all reproaches and transgressions, and unconcerned with any adverse consequences, the Shah personally engaged in the gratuitous vilification of his opponents, particularly the clerics. He deployed a language incompatible with expected royal deportment and norms of decorum associated with his formal position.

The rift between the monarchy and clerics on the eve of the referendum had grown dangerously

wide. Thereafter, the confrontation became more bitter, with criticisms and attacks often focusing on the Shah rather than the prime minister. Continued attempts to intimidate and silence vocal clerics reached a peak when on March 22, 1963, soldiers thinly disguised as peasants and workers chanting, “Long live the Shah” violently attacked a commemoration ceremony in the Qom seminary (Fayziyyeh), causing extensive damage. The assault aggravated clerical indignation and apprehension. Condemning it as reminiscent of Mongol atrocities, Khomeini, however, remained dauntless; he denounced the attack as an affront to Islam. Contending that Islam itself was in jeopardy, he pronounced precautionary dissimulation (*taqiyyeh*) to be reprehensible.³² Seeing the assault as an opportunity to be exploited, he intensified his barrage of criticism of the regime and directly or indirectly pressured other leading clerics not to remain passive.³³

The spiral of conflict between the regime and clerics resulted, in late May 1963, in an unprecedented invective by the Shah against his clerical opponents in which he reportedly alluded to them as “impure animals.”³⁴ The Shah’s speech provoked a bold rebuke from Khomeini. Addressing the Shah a week later, on June 3, which coincided with the emotionally charged day of Ashura, he dropped all formalities in referring to the monarch. He castigated gender equality as a Baha’i agenda; he also warned the Shah that he was surrounded by opportunists who were making him appear culpable for all shortcomings of the regime and who would desert him at the onset of the first real crisis. With unflinching confidence and prescient certainty he warned of a day when the Shah’s flight from the country would be greeted with public thanksgiving.³⁵ In the wake of increasing religious and political restlessness in Tehran, Qom, and several other cities, the regime arrested a number of clerics. Khomeini himself was arrested in the early morning of June 5, a move that triggered immediate uprising.

The open conflict with the clerics was compounded by the crisis arising from the indefinite suspension of elections and pressures for the revival of the constitutional process from a variety of groups, including the National Front. The regime’s policies aimed at enhancing its control over the pastoral nomadic population had also provoked serious unrest among them in the Southern province of Fars, which the army suppressed with great difficulty. No recent development, however, had shaken the regime to its foundation as effectively as the rioting in Tehran triggered by the arrest of Khomeini and other clerical opponents of the regime. In the context of broad opposition to royal autocracy, the disaffection of the clerics, signaling the cumulative resentments of the traditional classes, had provided a favorable ground for anti-regime outbursts.

The June uprising involved segments of the religious middle classes as well as subaltern and underclass elements. It engulfed Tehran’s traditional heartland around the *bazaar*. The Shah initially vacillated regarding how to deal with the situation, but the determination of the government of Alam and the regime’s willingness to use violence proved crucial in quelling the uprising. The ferocity and scale of the unrest severely damaged the regime’s projected image of stability, but it demonstrated the loyalty of the security apparatus and armed forces, and their willingness to confront and suppress such challenges. The casualties were considerable; Alam subsequently wrote that ninety people had died in the clashes.³⁶ Others have given much higher figures for the deaths in Tehran and elsewhere; Khomeini would later speak of the death of 15,000 people.³⁷ In addition to the casualties, large numbers were also arrested. With the aim of ending lingering anti-regime activities, martial law was declared in Tehran and Shiraz, and was not lifted until the autumn. The regime branded the uprising as an organized regressive sedition concocted at foreign instigation and with foreign financial support, the Shah declaring that the participants had received the paltry sum of twenty-five rials each to take part. Many noted that this was tantamount to admitting, inadvertently, the existence of acute

poverty in the country.³⁸

The Shah and Khomeini both described the June uprising as a “turning point.”³⁹ For the Shah it was a momentous event in his reign, as he had faced and overcome a dangerous onslaught. For Khomeini it was a milestone in “the history of our country,” signifying the political mobilization of the clerics and their capacity to inspire a serious challenge to the regime.⁴⁰ As a defining moment for Khomeini and his supporters, the uprising furnished them with a mythology and martyrs. In June 1979, the first postrevolutionary anniversary of the event was commemorated in the presence of Khomeini, who had returned from exile four months earlier. He declared that those who had participated and suffered in the 1963 uprising represented the kind of people who had brought about the 1979 Revolution, and were exclusively entitled to inherit its fruits.⁴¹

Politically, the uprising could be seen as a popular outburst aimed at confronting and countering unfettered autocracy.⁴² Socially, however, it was conservative and a defense of endangered traditional values. It was at once spontaneous and organized, with remnants of the Fedaiyan-e Islam and organizers of Moharram commemoration ceremonies playing key roles. Notable participants included a number of street leaders, represented by Tayyeb Haj-Reza’i, who had acted in support of the Shah in the coup of 1953. Treated as a scapegoat after refusing to implicate Khomeini in the actual instigation of the June uprising, Haj-Reza’i and a colleague were executed in early November 1963, despite appeals to the Shah on their behalf.⁴³ These executions were intended to show that the regime had fulfilled its obligations of punishing the alleged culprits for the riots, and to underline the dispensability of the rank and file of traditional strata, deterring them from similar conduct. The executions also underscored the erosion of the regime’s ties with these strata of Iranian society.

In the wake of his detention, Khomeini came to assume the stature of a larger-than-life figure: as SAVAK noted, stories regarding his heroism captured the popular imagination.⁴⁴ The Shah and regime were pressured by a barrage of telegrams calling for his release, and leading provincial clerics gathered in Tehran to secure his freedom. As an act of solidarity, and fearing the possibility of Khomeini’s ill treatment or execution, four senior Ayatollahs – including Shari’atmadari – issued a statement declaring him a *marja’* so that he could enjoy greater immunity.⁴⁵ But moderate clerics such as Shari’atmadari that were broadly sympathetic to the constitutionalist aims of the National Front were apprehensive about the consequences of radicalism or direct confrontation with the Shah.⁴⁶ The challenge facing most senior clerics was how to show their solidarity with Khomeini, retrieve the prestige of the clergy, and extricate themselves from the crisis without losing face. Failing to secure the removal of Alam, who continued to enjoy royal backing,⁴⁷ the radical clerics, according to SAVAK, began to lose their fervor, and most clerics seemed prepared to settle for a “face saving compromise.”⁴⁸ Conservatives such as Behbahani also feared that supporters of Mosaddeq might exploit the situation.⁴⁹

The regime also wanted to defuse the crisis.⁵⁰ Khomeini was released from prison in early August 1963, but placed under house arrest in Tehran. He was buoyed by popular and clerical reactions to his arrest. Forming a more acute assessment of the Shah than the Shah did of him, Khomeini gained a better understanding of the vulnerabilities of the regime and how they could be exploited. His income, to be used for religious purposes, increased radically. Most politicized clerics and factions increasingly came to regard him as their undisputed leader.⁵¹ On the other hand, his failure to derail the regime in its objectives constituted a major setback. He and his supporters failed to secure the commutation of Haj-Reza’i’s death sentence, and the government proceeded in the autumn of 1963 with the trial of the leaders of the Freedom Movement, who had no affiliation with Khomeini but had

nevertheless supported him. Moreover, and despite pronounced opposition from clerics and non-clerics alike, as well as a boycott, the regime went ahead with the stage-managed parliamentary elections. It intensified punitive and divisive measures as well as surveillance and its suppression of critics and opponents.

Many secular opponents of the Shah saw the clergy as a countervailing force vis-à-vis the dictatorial regime, but not as a likely or viable substitute for it. They generally regarded the political emergence of the clerics as a consequence of the Shah's suppressive and exclusionist policy toward the secular opposition, and of the absence of political leaders capable of opposing the regime. Reiterating this point, the pro-Mosaddeq Socialist League of the National Movement maintained that the people participated in the uprising primarily for political reasons, and the regime had suffered its greatest setback, as the episode revealed that it had forfeited its religious basis of support.⁵² There was no doubt that the Shah had alienated a crucial cluster of the regime's religious-traditional supporters. The impact and presumed commitment of the regime's newly won or would-be supporters, such as peasants who acquired land or women who could now vote or be elected, remained uncertain. In a cabinet session discussing the June uprising, one minister warned that "the society must rely on [social] forces and the country cannot be indefinitely governed by coercion and the bayonet ... we must not assume that the problem has ended ... we should bolster the class that society must rely on, otherwise we will face a real danger."⁵³

However, to the alarm of his more discerning supporters, the Shah felt the episode required no rethinking of his political approach. Some of the non-servile members of the political establishment privately questioned the wisdom of the Shah's policies, regretted the alienation of the clerics, and attempted to persuade the Shah to change course. Ali Dashti, then Iran's ambassador to Lebanon, warned against antagonizing the clerics, whom he regarded as traditionally supportive of the monarchy. Dashti considered it exceedingly perilous that the Shah should personally have become the target of open vilification. Khomeini, Dashti argued, emerged in the context of tangible public grievances, and his "credibility and prestige rested on his audacious willingness to articulate the peoples' unexpressed aspirations."⁵⁴

The Shah, however, remained resentfully dismissive of such warnings. He regarded the clerics as residues of the past; a force that had been confronted and discomfited once and for all. He did not feel the need to explore the social roots of the uprising, and seemed to believe his own propaganda that development defused discontent and education vitiated rigid religiosity. The structural basis of the clerics' social power was neither adequately understood nor successfully undermined. More significantly, the growing politically exploitable sociopolitical grievances remained largely unnoticed and unaddressed. There was no real effort to address the concerns of any other segment of the opposition. Indeed, all opponents were dismissed collectively as enemies of progress.

Khomeini was released in April 1964 after ten months of detention and house arrest. Returning to Qom, he showed no indication of having been cowed by his treatment. Not long after, an opportunity arose that prompted him once again to confront the regime and eclipse, if not eradicate, the reactionary label. The confrontation was precipitated by a move widely seen as indicative of the formalization of U.S. hegemony in Iran. In March 1962, the U.S. government had demanded immunity from trial under Iranian law for all American military advisers and technical personnel working in Iran. The envisaged Status of Forces Agreement, eventually accepted by Iran, gave the U.S. government exclusive jurisdiction over all its personnel working in Iran and their dependents. In July 1964, a bill containing this provision was rushed through the senate, which had prevaricated for over six months, and on October 13 was submitted to the lower house, expecting smooth ratification. The

bill passed narrowly, with a large number of deputies absenting themselves from the chamber.⁵⁵

Enraged by the unexpected conduct of the parliament, the Shah blamed it on Anglophiles and the British, whom he believed sought to undermine U.S.-Iranian ties.⁵⁶ Senior U.S. officials admitted that this “highly unpopular measure” was “rammed through the Iranian Parliament” by the Shah at “our insistence and with considerable risk to his domestic position.”⁵⁷ The measure provoked widespread indignation. In a vigorous denunciation, Khomeini castigated the Shah for relinquishing Iranian independence, national sovereignty, and dignity. Decrying the growing influence of the United States and Israel in Iran, and linking the passage of the bill to the approval of a \$200 million credit from American banks for the purchase of U.S. arms, Khomeini castigated the parliament and government as illegitimate and treasonous, dismissing the Shah as an American stooge determined to undermine Islam, end the influence of the clerics, and thereby proceed with his policies unopposed. He bemoaned the elimination from public life of patriotic statesmen, and warned the Shah to change his conduct or expect a dire fate.⁵⁸

This speech resulted in Khomeini’s arrest and exile to Turkey, which he would soon leave to begin a long exile in Iraq. This period gave him the opportunity to relinquish or rethink his traditional views, move from stipulating clerical supervision of governance to direct clerical rule, and ponder his “utopian” vision of an Islamic polity.⁵⁹ His banishment provoked no reaction comparable to that following his arrest in 1963. The government acted in a more coordinated manner. Friction in the ranks of the clerics had also deepened, with traditionalists increasingly considering Khomeini’s approach as dangerous and inimical to the interests of the seminarians. Fearing what they saw as his adventurist extremism, and unhappy that his concerns were overlapping with those of the secular opponents of the Shah, many clerics doubted the religious pertinence of Khomeini’s latest outburst.⁶⁰ Moreover, the regime’s propaganda played its part in portraying him as more concerned with politics than religion.

Not unexpectedly, Khomeini’s new focus enhanced his public appeal. Even some secular opponents of the Shah, ignoring what they disliked in Khomeini’s pronouncements, regarded the substance of his political message to be converging with theirs. Many also acknowledged his zeal and tenacity. Once again, Khomeini had raised his voice in protest when, in effect, all his actual and potential secular rivals in the public sphere had been banished or silenced, particularly in the aftermath of the White Revolution. By invoking the Shah’s disregard for nationalist sensibilities and constitutional processes, Khomeini had attacked the Shah where he was most vulnerable. Shrewdly combining the constitutional and nationalist causes with the religious, Khomeini distilled and articulated the anti-autocratic sentiments permeating Iranian society, enabling him to become a figure of growing national renown. As the U.S. embassy noted, Khomeini’s latest showdown with the Shah lent him “a new aura of martyrdom,” raising “his stature among the Iranian contenders for Shia paramountcy.” In a similar vein, the religious opposition had “obtained a new lease of life by having become an ally of the nationalist opposition.”⁶¹ Thanks to the immunities issue, the image that would be retained in the collective memory of Khomeini’s supporters, sympathizers, and even components of the intelligentsia was primarily that of an implacable opponent of autocracy and defender of national dignity.

The Shah seems to have primarily feared the rise of another Mosaddeq, a leftist challenge, or a military coup. He thus never relaxed his suppression of the Mosaddeqists or the left, and sought to eliminate renegade officers such as the former SAVAK chief, General Teymur Bakhtiar. Neither the Shah nor any of his secular supporters or opponents, nor indeed the more sober Islamists, imagined that circumstances would one day dramatically turn in favor of Khomeini. The Shah and royalists

unwittingly but crucially contributed to the permissive conditions for Khomeini's unthinkable reemergence at the helm of the revolution in 1978–1979. He was enabled to portray himself as everything that the Shah was not. Following his exile, efforts to secure his return were abandoned, as he refused to relinquish politics.⁶² The Shah continued to maintain working relations with quietist clerics, avoiding them as much as possible but also appeasing them with minor concessions. Seeking to disrupt oppositional clerical activities, SAVAK remained watchful. But the regime lacked the intellectual resources and acuity for an accurate assessment of the situation in the country. The systematic discrediting of the constitutional process rendered the regime vulnerable to the force of the criticisms and arguments that Khomeini had come to appropriate and articulate or invoke. However, confident of the commanding strength of the regime, the Shah and his longtime adviser and court minister, Alam, regularly reassured each other that the power of the clerics had been permanently undermined.

¹ After the revolution of 1979, Khomeini repeatedly recounted various versions of the following story which he had heard from a fellow mullah and “weighed on his heart”: during the Reza Shah era, a taxi driver had refused to have a mullah as a passenger, saying that two categories of people would not be given rides – mullahs and whores. Ruhollah Khomeini, *Sahifeh-ye Emam* (Tehran: 1999), vol. 6, p. 239; vol. 7, p. 75; and vol. 9, pp. 403, 509.

² Fakhreddin Azimi, interview with Mehdi Ha’eri-Yazdi, September 1985; see also his memoirs, *Khaterat-e Mehdi Ha’eri-Yazdi*, Harvard Oral History Project, ed. Habib Ladjevardi (Bethesda, MD, 2001), pp. 96–97.

³ Ha’eri-Yazdi, *Khaterat*, pp. 95–96.

⁴ Hossein Ali Montazeri, *Khaterat* (n.p., 2000), p. 169.

⁵ Texts in Khomeini, *Sahifeh*, vol. i, p. 26.

⁶ Ha’eri, *Khaterat*, pp. 55–56, 92–94. Ha’eri gives a different account of the reasons for the Borujerdi-Khomeini rift, *ibid.*, pp. 92–94; see also Khomeini, *Sahifeh*, vol. i, pp. 31–32.

- [7](#) Mohammad-Taqi Falsafi, *Khaterat* (Tehran: 1997), pp. 190–199.
- [8](#) Foreign Office minutes: “Miss A.K.S. Lambton’s impressions of Iran – Summer of 1956,” FO 371/120714.
- [9](#) American Embassy in Tehran to U.S. Department of State, December 29, 1962, 788.00/12–12–2962.
- [10](#) Montazeri, *Khaterat*, pp.188–192.
- [11](#) Markaz-e barrasi-ye asnad-e tarikhi-ye vezarat-e ettela’at, *Qeyam-e 15 khordad beh revayat-e asnad-e SAVAK* (Tehran, 1999), vol. i, pp. 292–294.
- [12](#) Montazeri, *Khaterat*, p. 201.
- [13](#) *Ibid.*, p. 198
- [14](#) *Ibid.*, p. 189; see also Sadeq Khalkhali, *Khaterat* (Tehran: 2002) p. 57.
- [15](#) Ruhollah Khomeini, *Kashf-e Asrar* (n.p. 1944), p. 189.
- [16](#) *Ibid.*, p. 222.

[17 Ibid.](#), p. 292.

[18 Ibid.](#), pp. 279–281.

[19](#) Ruhollah Khomeini, speech, December 2, 1962, *Sahifeh*, vol. i, pp. 113–121.

[20](#) Ruhollah Khomeini, March 13, 1963, [ibid.](#), pp. 153–154.

[21](#) Montazeri, *Khaterat*, pp. 257–260; see also Ezzatollah Sahabi, *Khaterat: nimqarn khatereh va tajrebeh* (Tehran: 2009), p. 252.

[22](#) Markaz-e barrasi-ye asnad-e tarikhi-ye vezarat-e ettela’at, *Qeyam-e 15 khordad beh revayat-e asnad-e SAVAK*, vol. i, pp. 187–188.

[23](#) Montazeri, *Khaterat*, p. 204.

[24](#) Markaz-e barrasi-ye asnad-e tarikhi-ye vezarat-e ettela’at, *Qeyam-e 15 khordad beh revayat-e asnad-e SAVAK* (Tehran: 1999), vol. iii, p.115.

[25](#) Ruhollah Khomeini, speech, December 2, 1962, *Sahifeh*, vol. i, p.118.

[26](#) Montazeri, *Khaterat*, p. 208.

[27 Ibid.](#), pp. 207–209.

[28 Ibid.](#), p. 205.

[29](#) Harrison to Hiller, November 17, 1962, FO 371/164186.

[30](#) Vice President Lyndon Johnson, who visited Iran in late August 1962, one month after Alam assumed premiership, told the Shah that “the ultimate strength, prosperity and independence of Iran” would be best promoted by “progress made in the fields of economic well-being of the population and in social justice,” adding that enjoying U.S. “moral and material assistance” required embracing the reform agenda proposed by the United States. Julius Holmes (Tehran) to DOS, tel., Aug. 25, 1962, quoted in Douglas Little, *American Orientalism: The United States and the Middle East since 1945* (Chapel Hill and London, 2002), p. 219. Bringing reform proposals, most of which were incorporated in the White Revolution, and regarding the Shah as a “valuable asset,” Johnson argued that “we must cooperate with him and influence him as best we can, since we have no acceptable alternative. We should continue to prod him in the direction of social reform to prevent his losing the affections of the masses of his people.” U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961–1963*, vol. xviii, Near East, 1962–1963, p. 72, “Editorial Note.”

[31](#) Harrison to Hiller, November 17, 1962, FO 371/164186.

[32](#) Ruhollah Khomeini, statement, April 2, 1963, *Sahifeh*, vol. i, pp. 177–179. There was no major disagreement between Khomeini and other clerics regarding the circumstances in which precautionary dissimulation was or was not permissible. (I am grateful to Professor Hossein Modarressi for clarifying this point.) Khomeini’s pronouncement on this issue, however, was taken by certain lay elements to mark a laudable rupture with an embedded religious practice.

[33](#) Ruhollah Khomeini, speech, March 20, 1963, *Sahifeh*, vol. i, pp. 157–165.

[34](#) Ruhollah Khomeini, speech, June 3, 1963, retrieved from <http://www.imam-khomeini.com/web1/persian/showitem.aspx?cid=455&pid=511&h=1&f=2>.

[35](#) Ruhollah Khomeini, speech, June 3, 1963, [ibid](#). An edited version can be found in *Sahifeh*, vol. i, pp. 243–248.

[36](#) Asadollah Alam, *Yaddashtha* (ed. Alinaqi Alikhani), vol. i (Tehran: 1992), p. 206.

[37](#) Khomeini, *Sahifeh*, vol. viii, p. 53; vol. xii, p. 396.

[38](#) Markaz-e barrasi-ye asnad-e tarikhi-ye vezarat-e ettela'at, *Qeyam-e 15 khordad beh revayat-e asnad-e SAVAK*, vol. iii, p. 202.

[39](#) Alam, *Yaddashtha*, vol. iii (Bethesda, 1995), p. 318; Khomeini, speech, June 4, 1980, *Sahifeh*, vol. xii, pp. 396–399.

[40](#) Khomeini, [ibid](#). See also Khomeini, speech, June 5, 1979, *Sahifeh*, vol. viii, pp. 53–60.

[41](#) [Ibid](#).

[42](#) One observer of clerical politics regarded “the disturbances” of June 1963 as “the culmination of a movement of resistance to the exercise of arbitrary power by the government.” Considering it “an oversimplification” to attribute “the disturbances solely, or indeed mainly” to opposition to land reform or women’s suffrage, she regarded their “causes” as being “far more complex and deep-seated,” arguing that “unless there had been a feeling that injustice had passed all reasonable bounds it is unlikely that the protest would have taken the form it did.” Ann K. S. Lambton, “A Reconsideration of the Position of the *Marja’ Al-Taqlid* and the Religious Institution,” *Studia Islamica*, no. 20 (1964),

pp. 120–121. In a later work, reiterating the same point, Lambton described Khomeini as “a man of reputed honesty and progressive ideas.” A. K. S. Lambton, *The Persian Land Reform, 1962–1966* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), p 112.

[43](#) Markaz-e barrasi-ye asnad-e tarikhi-ye vezarat-e ettela’at, *Qeyam-e 15 khordad beh revayat-e asnad-e SAVAK* (Tehran, 2001) vol. iv, pp. 83, 88–89.

[44](#) Markaz-e barrasi-ye asnad-e tarikhi-ye vezarat-e ettela’at, *Qeyam-e 15 khordad beh revayat-e asnad-e SAVAK*, vol. iii, pp. 281, 321, 330.

[45](#) Montazeri, *Khaterat*, pp. 234–236.

[46](#) [Ibid.](#), p. 219; Markaz-e barrasi-ye asnad-e tarikhi-ye vezarat-e ettela’at, *Qeyam-e 15 khordad beh revayat-e asnad-e SAVAK*, vol. iii, pp. 427–431, 515–516.

[47](#) [Ibid.](#), *Qeyam-e 15 khordad beh revayat-e asnad-e SAVAK*, vol. iii, pp. 425–427.

[48](#) [Ibid.](#), pp. 537–538.

[49](#) [Ibid.](#), p. 418. Summing up the six month-long activities of the clerics, SAVAK concluded in early December 1963 that clerically inspired fervor was diminishing, as the clerics had not gained the result they had hoped for, and the idea of compromise with the government was growing (although the radical clerics were still able to engage in provocation). Markaz-e barrasi-ye asnad-e tarikhi-ye vezarat-e ettela’at, *Qeyam-e 15 khordad beh revayat-e asnad-e SAVAK*, vol. iv, pp. 255–261.

[50](#) Markaz-e barrasi-ye asnad-e tarikhi-ye vezarat-e ettela’at, *Qeyam-e 15 khordad beh revayat-e asnad-e SAVAK*, vol. iii, pp. 294–295.

- [51](#) A telegram to the government sent in March 1964 demanding Khomeini's freedom, and referring to him as grand Ayatollah, included the names of most clerics who were to play major roles in Iranian politics in the post-1979 era. Text in Markaz-e barrasi-ye asnad-e tarikhi-ye vezarat-e ettela'at, *Qeyam-e 15 khordad beh revayat-e asnad-e SAVAK*, vol. iv, pp. 391–392.
- [52](#) Text in [ibid.](#), pp. 240–243.
- [53](#) Alinaqi Alikhani, *Matn-e kamel-e mozakerat-e hay'at-e daulat-e taghut dar panzdah-e khordad-e 1342* (n.p., n.d.), p. 45.
- [54](#) Ali Dashti, letter to the Shah, June 1963, in Ali Dashti, *Avamel-e soqut* (ed. Mehdi Mahuzi), (Tehran: 2002), pp. 181–192.
- [55](#) Mohammad Ali Safari, *Qalam va siyasat* (Tehran: 1994), pp. 661–717.
- [56](#) Wright to Morris, October 1964, FO 371/ 175712.
- [57](#) Talbot to Rusk, December 19, 1964, U.S. Department of State, Central Files, POL 15–1 IRAN, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964–1968*, Vol. xxii, Iran, p. 118.
- [58](#) Khomeini, speech, October 26, 1964, *Sahifeh*, vol. i, pp. 415–424.
- [59](#) On the traditional character of Khomeini's views prior to developing the concept of *velayat-e faqih* in Iraq, see Montazeri, *Khaterat*, p. 199.

[60](#) [Ibid.](#), pp. 255–256.

[61](#) American Embassy, Tehran, to U.S. Department of State, October 27, 1964, DEF 15–3 IRAN 2/5.

[62](#) American embassy, Tehran, to U.S. Department of State, August 17, 1965, POL 2 IRAN.

2 The Rise of Khomeinism

Problematizing the Politics of Resistance in Pre-Revolutionary Iran

Mojtaba Mahdavi

Introduction

Ayatollah Khomeini's thinking was in the making for almost half a century. His views evolved over five distinct stages, beginning with political quietism and concluding with political absolutism. To be more precise, Khomeini's political life can be structured along five individual and interrelated signposts: Khomeini as the quietist (1920s–1940s); the constitutionalist (1940s–1971); the revolutionary (1971–1979); the *vali-ye faqih* (1979–1987); and the absolute *vali-ye faqih* (1987–1989). The young Khomeini's attitude to politics was congruent with the long-established tradition of political quietism and social conservatism of the clerical institution. Khomeini's transition from quietism to constitutionalism was prompted by the fear of secularism undermining the traditional role of the *ulema* in society.¹ During this period, as long as the *shariah* was enforced, the form of government was of little concern to Khomeini. However, Khomeini began to change his position in the 1970s. His theory of *velayat-e faqih* (“guardianship of the jurist”) was a point of departure from constitutionalism to radicalism. According to the radical and revolutionary Khomeini, the institution of monarchy was illegitimate, and only an Islamic government bore the right to rule a Muslim population. He successfully transformed the last monarchy into Iran's first republic, institutionalizing his theory of *velayat-e faqih* and turning from revolutionary into *vali-ye faqih* and later absolute (*motlaqeh*) *vali-ye faqih*.

From December 1987 until his death in June 1989, Khomeini issued various decrees and expressed absolute authority in a number of areas. Above all, Khomeini was concerned about the fate of the state he had created. The Iran-Iraq war (1981–1988), a decision over his succession, and the ever-increasing disagreements over socio-economic and cultural policies between the regime's factions pushed Khomeini towards political absolutism. In January 1988, he made it clear that “the government is empowered to unilaterally revoke any *shariah* agreement that it has conducted with people when those agreements are contrary to the interests of the country or of Islam.”² Moreover, the 1989 amended constitution expanded the power of the *faqih* by transferring the president's task of coordinating the three branches of government to the office of the *velayat-e faqih*. It made it explicit that the *vali-ye faqih* held “absolute” power by adding the phrase “*motlaqeh*” to Articles 107–110, defining his total authority.³ In sum, Khomeini as the absolute *vali-ye faqih* came to adopt the view that all aspects of Islam were subordinate to the interests of the Islamic state.

In this chapter, we will examine the third stage of Khomeini's life, within which the revolutionary conditions transformed him from a quietest/constitutionalist cleric into a revolutionary Ayatollah. To that end, this chapter addresses the following questions: Why and how did Khomeinism become the hegemonic voice not only of Iranian Shi'ism, but also of the opposition to the Shah's regime? How did Khomeinism successfully isolate contemporary and traditional discourses in Iran? What factors prevented other religious and secular discourses from being able to compete with Khomeinism?

What factors contributed to the success of one among many? To answer these questions, it is the purpose of this chapter to analyze and contextualize the making of Khomeinism⁴ under the Shah's regime during its final years leading up to the revolution of 1979.

Many scholars admit that the causes and outcomes of revolutionary conditions are better explained once the role and function of structures and agencies are equally and properly acknowledged. Any one-sided consideration of the voluntarist position (agency without structural limits) or structuralist position (structures without agency) undermines the complex and dialectical relations between structure and agency. This dialectical relation suggests that there is always a combination of “a willful action of knowledgeable actors within constraints and possibilities supplied by pre-existing structures.”⁵ There is always a web of possibilities for agency “to make choices and pursue strategies within given limits.” The agents are thus “both active and structured.”⁶ In this chapter, I will keep an equal distance from structural determinism and extreme voluntarism by examining the extent to which structural constraints and the activities of agencies contributed to the hegemony of Khomeinism. An operational definition of structure and agency will clarify my argument. I will ask how and why structural constraints evolved under the Shah's regime in three major forms: “petrolic neo-sultanism,” uneven development, and the global structure of power during the Cold War. In the following section, I will argue that agency was able to “shift strategic postures within the margins of maneuverability.”⁷ This was a process engendered by structural constraints, and played out through the following three channels: radical-populist culture, traditional institutions, and charismatic clerical leadership. This dialectical approach provides a proper link between structural constraints and political action, and provides a better understanding of the revolutionary conditions leading up to the rise and hegemony of Khomeinism in the late 1970s.

Revolutionary Conditions: Structural Factors

Structural constraints were rooted in the nature of the Shah's land reforms in the 1960's and increased oil revenues in the 1970s, which intensified the sultanistic nature of the regime and made the state the sole dominant actor in the economic and political structure of Iran. The land reforms also deepened the uneven structure of development, and enlarged the gap between rich and poor, creating a marginalized social class in the process. The increased oil revenue made the state more independent of domestic forces, but increased Iran's dependency on the United States and foreign control over its economic and internal affairs. The first priority of the state was to strengthen its military forces and turn Iran into a regional power allied with the United States. In this regard, a combination of Iran's geopolitical position and the international structure of power during the Cold War provided the Shah with an opportunity to turn his regime into the closest regional ally of the United States. These structural constraints – petrolic neo-sultanism, uneven development, and the global structure of power – contributed to the revolutionary conditions of the 1970s.

Petrolic Neo-Sultanism

Mohammad Reza Shah came to power in 1941 and was overthrown in 1979. The years 1941–1953 are characterized as a period when the “new Shah largely depended on the landlord-*ulama* alliance, although he was also keen to enhance his personal power through the army as well as foreign support.”⁸ From 1951 to 1953, as the nationalist and liberal democrat Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddeq struggled to establish a parliamentary democracy and nationalize Iran's oil industries, the

Shah ruled the country in name only. Economic constraints, together with hostility “from the Shah, parts of the army, landlords, the religious establishment, Britain, and in the end America” led to the overthrow of Mosaddeq in a 1953 coup.⁹ From 1953 to 1963, the post-coup regime took on the form of authoritarianism. Although politically and economically supported by the United States, it was backed by the landlords, religious establishment, and army. In the meantime, the Shah’s personal power increased at the expense of his domestic allies. However, a combination of domestic economic crises during the years 1960–1962 and pressure from the U.S. administration under President Kennedy forced the Shah to listen to the regime’s opposition, which suggested implementing a land reform.¹⁰ However, the reform cabinet did not last, and Prime Minister Amini was forced to resign. The land reform, now diluted with less emphasis on social changes, was to be instrumental in consolidating the Shah’s personal power. The Shah won his White Revolution in a “concocted referendum” in January 1963,¹¹ but soon lost the confidence of both traditional and modern classes: “The White Revolution had been designed to preempt a Red Revolution. Instead, it paved the way for an Islamic Revolution.”¹²

The Shah’s policy of autocratic modernization soon undermined the authority of the clerical establishment. In 1967, the *Majlis* – ordered by the Shah – passed the Family Protection Law, which conflicted with *shariah* and challenged the social status of the clerical institution.¹³ The creation of the Literacy Corps was regarded as defying the traditional role of the clergy in the education system. In the mid-1970s, the regime began closing down religious institutions and lecture halls. It also dissolved all university-based religious student associations, forbade various religious figures from delivering public lectures, and shut down a number of religious publishing centers.¹⁴ Likewise, the regime sought control over the bazaar in a number of ways: it blamed *bazaaris* for inflation; and fined, imprisoned, and banned some *bazaaris* from doing business.¹⁵ It also dissolved the bazaar’s independent guilds and created a state-led chamber of commerce.

Equally important, the Shah’s White Revolution soon came into conflict with the new industrial class: the regime increased business taxes by 80 percent, decreased industrial profit margins by 15 percent, and ordered hundreds of companies to sell 49 percent of their shares to their own workers and the general public.¹⁶ Moreover, tax exemption and state licensing was granted to a close circle of clients attached to the regime. The narrow social base and near absence of regime links with civil society discouraged pro-business and capitalist classes from supporting the regime and left the social base of the regime restricted to the ruler and his clients.¹⁷ For the new middle class, “the Shah’s modernization program was not criticized for being modern, but because it failed to achieve modernity in the fullest meaning of the term.”¹⁸ The new middle class now had every reason to raise its voice. The Shah’s regime, in sum, became increasingly isolated among the traditional and modern middle classes in the 1970s. The riot of June 1963, led by Ayatollah Khomeini, was defeated. However, it transformed him into the national figurehead that would lead a revolutionary mass movement in 1979.

Neo-sultanism, or the re-emergence of sultanism in a modern guise, became the main characteristic of the regime during its final years leading up to the revolution of 1979. As Theda Skocpol observed, from 1963 to 1977 the Shah was himself the state; not merely a “figurehead monarch, but rather a practicing patrimonial absolutist ... without him the state could not function.”¹⁹ Similarly, Anthony Parsons argues that “to all intents and purposes, the Shah was the regime: monarch and the state had become virtually synonymous.”²⁰

The Shah merely paid lip service to the constitution and modern political procedures, and was

rather thankful that Iran under his rule was not “suffering” from democracy. “Thank God,” he said to his court minister, Alam, “we in Iran have neither the desire nor the need to suffer from democracy.”²¹ Given the Shah’s views on democracy, Iran’s parliament – the *Majlis* – became merely a rubber stamp for his policies. At this time, the opposition were forbidden from establishing political parties, and there was thus no genuine electoral competition. At the same time, the Shah created a specious two-party system headed by his confidants. The Melliyoan (Nationalists) and the pseudo-oppositional Mardom (People’s) parties were both founded on the Shah’s order, but soon collapsed because of the Shah’s intolerance of even limited competition between political parties. In 1963, by which time the regime had turned into a fully neo-sultanistic state, the Shah effectively established a one-party system by transferring the Melliyoan party into Iran-e Novin (New Iran), headed by then-Prime Minister Hasanali Mansur. In March 1975, the Rastakhiz (Resurgence) party was formed under the order of the Shah to implement his neo-sultanistic ideology as a single-party system. The Shah’s single-party system demonstrated the regime’s patrimonialism and arbitrariness under the guise of modernization and Westernization. The Shah, a modernizing autocrat, dissolved all (semi) independent organizations and utilized a populist semi-fascist form of mobilization to hide the regime’s crisis – forcing everybody to join the party or leave the country. In this sense, the regime became a clear example of neo-sultanism.

Moreover, the state became relatively alienated from society. Society had a limited impact on the state, not least because the state depended not on its citizens but on oil income to sustain itself. With the massive rise of oil prices in the early 1970s, Iran became a “rentier” state with little taxation, and consequently, little representation of its citizens. Oil financed more than 90 percent of imports and 80 percent of the annual budget, and allowed the state to disregard its internal tax base. Thus, the state’s major relationships with society were mediated via its expenditures on development projects, and not through taxation. According to Skocpol, the Shah’s regime was a “rentier state” because it “did not rule through, or in alliance with, any independent social class.”²² In class terms then, the state was in a hegemonic position vis-à-vis the dominant social classes.

The more the Shah fused his power with that of the state and relied on the state’s dependent-coercive apparatus, oil revenues, and the United States the more he abstracted himself from society.²³ In the end, the petrolic–neo-sultanistic state proved extremely fragile and was unable to sustain itself in the face of the revolutionary process overwhelming it.

Uneven Development

The Shah’s regime was built around an advanced state apparatus that exercised power arbitrarily, and without the decisive involvement of the main strata of Iranian society. This disjuncture between state and society had a negative impact on the regime’s development policies, and caused the conditions for uneven development in three different but interrelated ways. First, uneven development lent itself to discrepancies between economic and political progress. As a result, the political structure lagged far behind the economic modernization of the country. In other words, the relatively sound economic development of the 1960s and 1970s was achieved at the expense of political reforms. Although much of the oil revenue was invested in the industrial infrastructure of Iran, problems emerged when the regime failed to reconcile its contradictory neo-sultanistic nature with the emerging demands for political participation.²⁴ This structural disequilibrium between economic and political development meant that the Shah failed to implement political change appropriate to the economic and social upheavals taking place in Iranian society. The failure to delegate sustainable state-society relations

resulted in the collapse of the links between social and political structures, obstructing the communication of social grievances to the state, and eventually widening the existing gap between the social forces and political elites.²⁵

After the coup d'état of 1953 engineered by MI6 and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) reinstated the Shah's monarchy, he largely failed to restore his legitimacy in the eyes of the middle class. The Shah never fully trusted the middle class, and did not allow them to engage in meaningful political participation. The middle class, in return, was politically, culturally, and (in later years) economically dissatisfied with the regime: "In an age of republicanism, radicalism and nationalism, the Pahlavi regime appeared in the eyes of the intelligentsia to favor monarchism, conservatism, and Western imperialism."²⁶

Second, uneven development polarized Iran's economic structure, and formed a dual society with conflicting traditional and semi-industrial economies. The Shah's policy of economic development relied not on the people but on its "petrolic despotism" The regime's neo-sultanistic tendencies broke the last remaining historical connections between the *bazaaris* and the political system. For instance, in 1963, the bazaar's share of domestic trade in Gross Domestic Product (GDP) was 9.4 percent; in 1977–1978, its share sharply declined to 5.7 percent.²⁷ The *bazaaris* were to be the main target of the regime, given the Shah's failure to deal with the economic crisis. The regime blamed *bazaaris* for inflation, and launched an "anti-profiteering crusade" to control their businesses. As a result, many *bazaaris* were fined, and others were imprisoned and banned from doing business.²⁸ The Rastakhiz party dissolved all the independent guilds and created a chamber of commerce whose members were appointed by the state. The regime sought control of the bazaar by importing a large amount of goods to undercut their trade, and preparing to replace the location of Tehran's bazaar with a new freeway.

The Shah's White Revolution polarized the socio-economic system, frustrating both traditional and modern classes, and creating a new dissatisfied social class of the urban poor. The urban poor emerged from the failure of the Shah's land reform, and consisted largely of unfortunate rural migrants – mostly farmers or those with agricultural jobs – that were equally "unfortunate participants in the new urban social structure of the country."²⁹ Land reform had failed because it failed to distribute large enough land to support families to one-half of the landless peasantry, and did not distribute any land at all to the other half, leaving them with no option but to migrate to major cities.³⁰ Moreover, the land reform did not provide capital for the peasants who had received land, which was instead unevenly and unsuccessfully allocated to highly mechanized farms and agribusiness corporations. The Shah's version of modernization did little to improve the lives of urban migrants. These urban migrants quickly realized that they would not "escape from marginality," but, rather, would once again find themselves in a "struggle for subsistence."³¹ The Shah's uneven development satisfied neither the traditional nor the modern sectors of agriculture. It turned Iran from a net food exporter in the 1960s to a net importer of agricultural products, costing \$1 billion annually in the 1970s.³²

Third, Iran's socio-economic structure under the Shah was also influenced by the world economic system. This is explained by the theory of "dependent development." After 1953, relations between the Shah and the West were rapidly fortified. In the 1960's, international pressure and domestic needs pushed the regime to open up the economy to foreign investment. This and the foreign exchange earnings from national oil resources moved the country from periphery to semi-periphery in the global capitalist system. Foreign trade increased from \$162 million in 1954 to \$42 billion by 1978. The GDP grew at 10.8 percent annually from 1963 to 1978, and the GNP rose from \$3 billion in 1953 to \$53 billion in 1977.³³ Despite these achievements, the Shah's policy of development failed to serve

the interests of both traditional and modern social classes, as it was primarily aimed at serving foreign business interests. Fuelled by oil revenues and in response to the economic crisis, the Shah launched his land reform and pushed for rapid industrialization and urbanization. The regime's dependent development plan destroyed traditional agriculture, but failed to create a modern alternative – not least because of the \$2.6 billion annual food imports and extensive foreign agribusiness operations. The traditional bazaar economy and the guild artisans were squeezed out of the market with cheap imports, and suffered from arbitrary measures implemented by the state.³⁴

Global Structure of Power

The global structure of power during the Cold War was a major factor in determining the conditions favorable to the making of Khomeinism in a number of ways. First, under the shadow of the Cold War, progressive liberal and leftist individuals, ideas, and institutions were considered by the regime as major threats. The Shah's policies after 1953 undermined republican institutions in Iranian politics, and destroyed secular and progressive parties among the liberals and leftists. But the traditional clerical institutions remained almost untouched, largely because of the long history of clerical quietism and passive cooperation with the state. During the Cold War, the main enemy of the West and Western allies was communism. The Shah sought to use the conservative religious tradition of the clerical establishment to confront the immediate threat of Marxism and (in his phraseology) "Islamic Marxism." Both the regime of the Shah and the clerical establishment for different reasons were anti-communist. Hence, the anti-communist sentiments of the clerical establishment provided a temporary and relatively safe institutional haven for the clergy. Second, the relationship between the United States and the Shah was characterized by patron-client dependency. The foreign patron's supply of critical military aid and material resources was used by the regime to help fuel its domestic patronage networks. This in fact allowed "the ruler to detach his repressive state apparatus from its social base and dispense with domestic coalition building."³⁵ The dependence on American patronage further contributed to the rise of revolutionary conditions. Third, "the world-system conjuncture" contributed to the revolutionary process "in the sense that the core world power did not aggressively intervene to prevent it."³⁶ Iran joined the Baghdad Pact in 1955 (later the Central Treaty Organisation or CENTO), which was established to prevent communist advances into West Asia.³⁷ The Shah henceforth became the "policeman" of the Persian Gulf, and received access to the most advanced conventional arms and military equipment in the West. In the 1960s and 1970s, the U.S. military sales to Iran reached some \$20 billion.³⁸

Under the presidency of Jimmy Carter, U.S. foreign policy undertook a departure from the foreign policy of the Nixon era. In his dealings with the Shah, Carter highlighted the human rights situation in Iran, and insisted on limited liberalization. In turn, the Shah released some political prisoners and opened up the political atmosphere without implementing any major reforms. But President Carter remained unsure of whether the United States should continue its support for the Shah. Because Carter did not have strong feelings towards the Shah, nor a policy to deal with the revolution, the Shah would be left uncertain about how to respond to the coming revolutionary crisis.

The Revolutionary Conditions: Agential Actors/Factors

Karl Marx wrote that "men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves but under circumstances directly found, given

and transmitted from the past.”³⁹ Marx’s account of the relationship between structure and agency suggests that there is a web of possibilities for an agent to make choices, but only within certain constraints set by pre-existing structures. Equally important, however, is the fact that political actors are not “passive carriers of fixed interests and identities derived from positions in institutional or social structures.” Agents are not mechanically determined by structure, and are instead “both active and structured,”⁴⁰ and all existing social structures are products of human actions invested with cultural meanings.⁴¹ In order to emphasize this agency of Iranians in the build-up to the revolution, the next section will examine how and why Khomeinism as an idea and movement took advantage of structural opportunities. It will be argued that the radical-populist culture of Iran in the 1970s, the influence of traditional institutions, and the charismatic clerical leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini constituted the trilogy of ideas, institutions, and individuals that were the three most important factors that turned Khomeinism into the dominant voice of the opposition to the Shah.

The Hegemony of Radical-Populist Culture

As indicated, there is a dynamic interaction between culture and social structure. Whereas structural conditions affect the hegemonic capacity of a particular political culture, the capacity of a political culture “to organize social actions affects the historical opportunities actors are able to seize.”⁴² Political actors often strategically appropriate aspects of cultural heritage under revolutionary conditions. In other words, the question is not “to try to estimate how much culture shapes action” but instead “how culture is used by actors, how cultural elements constrain or facilitate patterns of action, [and] what aspects of a cultural heritage have enduring effects on action.”⁴³ These strategies of action are established by ideologies, which are defined as highly articulated belief systems aiming “to offer a unified answer to problems of social action.”⁴⁴ Ideologies are different from cultural traditions, but under certain historical circumstances – such as a revolution – cultural traditions and religious systems can become transformed into ideologies. As Clifford Geertz observes, ideologies such as ideological Islam come “to ‘hold’ rather than be ‘held’ by one’s beliefs.”⁴⁵

In this approach, the cultural system is not “unified” but instead contains “chunks of culture, each with its own history and resources for constructing organized strategies of action.”⁴⁶ Pre-revolutionary Iran maintained such chunks of cultural and political discourses. These included Khomeinism, Ali Shariati’s Islamic-left ideology, Mehdi Bazargan’s liberal-democratic Islam, and socialist guerrilla groups that experimented with Islamic and secular variants within a nationalist and Marxist framework.⁴⁷

Khomeinism

Although pre-revolutionary Iran never experienced a homogeneous Islamist political culture, Khomeinism dominated the revolutionary field. Khomeinism was built around a political and pragmatic reinterpretation of religious scripture that evolved into revolutionary, and is neither symbolic of a pre-modern movement nor a post-modern phenomenon. This was not traditionalism, as Ayatollah Khomeini departed radically from the Shi’i tradition of political quietism in favor of an activist ideology emphasizing socio-political change. Khomeinism cannot be regarded as fundamentalism either, as the term “fundamentalism” derived from American Protestantism and implies the literal interpretation of scriptural texts.

Similarly, in spite of its critique of modernity, Khomeinism is not a post-modern phenomenon. Khomeinism developed within the context of intellectual absolutism, insisting on the absolute representation of the Truth. Central to Khomeinism is its anti-hermeneutic claim, emphasising that the core meaning of the Quran is absolutely clear and not open to interpretation. Post-modernity is largely anti-foundational, but – like other versions of Islamism – Khomeinism insists on some absolute, a priori foundation as the basis of its ideology. Finally, it makes little sense to characterize Khomeinism as anti-modern or even pre-modern, given its profound engagement with the modern world such as its ability to equip itself with modern technologies of organization, surveillance, warfare, propaganda, and politics.⁴⁸ Ayatollah Khomeini's ideologized account of the Shi'i tradition offered Iranians respite from the ill effects of absolutism and imperialism, and led to the formation of a nationwide, populist revolutionary coalition. His political critique of the Shah's absolutism and Western imperialism was more renowned than his theory of the *velayat-e faqih*. A very general concept of his theory was prominent amongst segments of clerics, but his populist discourse appealed to other social forces.

In the early 1970s, "Khomeini was the first Shiite jurist to open the discussion (*fath-e bab*) of "Islamic government" in a work of jurisprudence."⁴⁹ The theory of Islamic government was a point of departure from constitutionalism. Khomeini began to change his position by suggesting that the institution of monarchy itself was illegitimate, and that Muslims should be ruled by an Islamic government. He stated that "the Islamic government is constitutional in the sense that the rulers are bound by a collection of conditions defined by the Quran and the traditions of the Prophet. ... In this system of government sovereignty originates in God, and law is the word of God."⁵⁰ Through a series of lectures delivered in Najaf in the early 1970s, he developed the novel idea that a just, knowledgeable, and faithful *faqih* was obliged to exercise both religious and political power in the absence of the Twelfth Imam of the Shi'i. "The ruler," Khomeini argued, "must have two characteristics: knowledge of the law and justice. He must have knowledge of the law because Islamic government is the rule of law and not the arbitrary rule of persons. In this sense only the *faqih* can be the righteous ruler."⁵¹

Khomeini's theory of the *velayat-e faqih* was a radical departure from the dominant traditional trends in Shi'ism.⁵² The theory challenged the conventional interpretation of the Shi'i doctrine of *Imamat*, which states that the legitimate leadership of the Muslim community belongs to the Prophet and his twelve successors or Imams. Khomeini proposed the novel idea that "our duty to preserve Islam" by establishing an Islamic government "is one of the most important obligations incumbent upon us; it is more necessary even than prayer and fasting."⁵³ He suggested the task of creating an Islamic government that can be justified on the basis of the "secondary ordinances" (*ahkam-e sanaviye*), where the "primary ordinances" (*shariah* law) are silent or not explicit.⁵⁴

Ayatollah Khomeini established his doctrine of *velayat-e faqih* on two traditional and rational grounds.⁵⁵ Government is an essential component of Islam because the Prophet himself created an Islamic state. Moreover, *shariah* law cannot be fully implemented without an Islamic state; Islamic government is the only legitimate tool to put Islamic rules into practice. For Khomeini, Muslims cannot and should not live under un-Islamic rule, and the implementation of *shariah* law should not be discontinued during the Great Occultation: "Did God limit the validity of His laws to two hundred years? Was everything pertaining to Islam meant to be abandoned after the Lesser Occultation?"⁵⁶ In this regard, the just *vali-ye faqih* is the only qualified ruler to undertake such a task in the absence of the Prophet and Imams.

Khomeini the constitutionalist (1940s–1971) stated the following: "Whatever is in [constitutional]

accord with the law of Islam we shall accept and whatever is opposed to Islam, even if it is the constitution, we shall oppose.”⁵⁷ However, Khomeini the revolutionary (1971–1979) increasingly came to believe that colonialism was a greater threat, “and thus shifted his emphasis from the constitution to Islam.”⁵⁸ He argued that the Pahlavi regime was bent on destroying Islam because only Islam and the *ulema* could prevent the onslaught of colonialism.⁵⁹ Khomeini the revolutionary rejected constitutionalism and monarchy: “Islam is fundamentally opposed to the whole notion of monarchy,” he argued, because it is one of the most shameful “reactionary manifestations.”⁶⁰

Why and how did Khomeini the constitutionalist become a revolutionary? Why did this change occur in the 1970s? Ayatollah Khomeini remained in close contact with events in Iran during his years in exile, and was deeply influenced by the new ideas and radical trends in the country. For instance, it is very likely that he read Jalal Al-e Ahmad’s (1923–1969) influential pamphlet “Gharbzadegi” (“Westoxification”), given that he frequently used the term in the late 1970s. Moreover, new waves of radical Islam reached Khomeini via young militant clerics influenced by Iran’s People’s Mojahedin Organization. In addition, Iranian student associations in Europe and North America that were impressed by Ali Shariati’s ideas further drove Khomeini towards radicalism.⁶¹ In the 1970s, Khomeini increasingly urged Iranians to rise up against the aggression of the “Zionist regime” (Israel) and to oppose the Shah’s friendly relations with the country. He attacked the Shah for creating the Rastakhiz Party, and opposed replacing Iran’s Islamic calendar with an imperial one known as the Shahanshahi calendar. He also condemned the Shah’s celebration of 2,500 years of Iranian monarchy. In short, by the 1970s, Khomeini had transformed into a populist and revolutionary Ayatollah with an ability to communicate with different strata of society within Iran and beyond.

Ali Shariati’s Radical-Left Islamic Ideology and Other Movements in Pre-Revolutionary Iran

Ali Shariati (1933–1977) was a man of his time, as his thinking was deeply influenced by the socio-political conditions of pre-revolutionary Iran. He was profoundly critical of the passive and quietist clergy, and argued that individual and social responsibilities were central to Islam. According to Shariati, it was the people and not God that were responsible for their own destiny. He contended strongly that Islam encouraged and endorsed social justice, and criticised the Shah’s regime’s brutal despotism as he called for an Islam that sought freedom. The core of Shariati’s discourse emphasized freedom (*azadi*), equality (*barabari*), and gnosis (*‘irfan*). In other words, his discourse was about freedom and democracy without capitalism; social justice and socialism without authoritarianism; and modern religion without clericalism. In his writings, he provided a critique of power, political dictatorship (*esetbdad*), material injustice (*estesmar*), and religious alienation (*estehmar*). He has been regarded as the engineer of “a radical layman’s religion that disassociated itself from the traditional clergy and associated itself with the secular trinity of social revolution, technological innovation, and cultural self-assertion.” As such, he “produced exactly what the young intelligentsia craved.”⁶²

Shariati “was a master synthesizer and himself a synthesis.”⁶³ He was “an individualist at war with individualism and a militant of social cause, ever evading the masses. A firm believer in the inevitability of change and the necessity of adaptation, he was a modernist who detested the persistence of outmoded traditions, customs and institutions.”⁶⁴ Ali Shariati was a “synthesis of the cultural and political traditions of the east and the west,” and he “looked at the east through western eyes and at the west through eastern eyes.”⁶⁵ Shariati articulated a humanistic Islamic discourse,

which appealed to the educated middle class. He accused the clergy of “monopolistic control” over the interpretation of Islam in order to set up a clerical despotism (*estebdade ruhani*), which would be “the worst and the most oppressive form of despotism possible in human history.”⁶⁶ He argued that throughout history, it was the people and not the privileged class that received the message of God. “It was precisely over the issue of clerical authority” that Shariati called for an Islamic Reformation.⁶⁷ But an Islamic Reformation, Abrahamian observes, remained a challenging task, as the clergy (*ulama*) provided the dominant interpretation of Islam over the centuries.⁶⁸

In Shariati’s view, Iran’s progress depended on raising the consciousness of the people by radically transforming Iran’s social order, which required a primarily social and not merely political revolution. According to Shariati, Iran still remained in the “age of faith,” comparable to Europe in the late feudal era on the eve of the European Renaissance. The *rushanfekran* (intelligentsia), Shariati argued, represented the critical conscience of society, and were thus obliged to launch a “renaissance” and “reformation.” Shariati would later change this position in *Ummat va Emamat*, and argue in *Bazgasht* that the intelligentsia should not lead the people. Shariati increasingly came to believe that the role of the intellectuals should be to provide critical analysis of the material reality surrounding them, instead of providing a future blueprint for the people.

That radical and critical account of the status quo in Iran was in many ways congruent with the demands of the university students, middle class intellectuals, and urban classes of workers and migrants. Shariati’s popularity came to exceed almost all other religious and secular intellectuals in pre-revolutionary Iran. Hence, Shariati is widely regarded as the Voltaire of the 1979 revolution. However, he was “ignored by the secularists, admonished by the clerics, and punished by the Shah’s regime. ... The first camp considered him peripheral, the second treated him as an *enfant terrible*, and the third viewed him as a troublesome Islamic-Marxist who needed to be silenced.”⁶⁹ Shariati did not even fit the mould of the pioneers of “liberal Islam” in pre-revolutionary Iran, who sought political power through principles of constitutionalism and parliamentary democracy by advocating for the accommodation of Islam with liberal democracy. Mehdi Bazargan (1905–1990), Yadollah Sahabi (1905–2002), and to some degree the liberal cleric Mahmood Taleghani (1911–1979) and their associated political party – the Liberation Movement of Iran – represented the politics of liberal Islam. Its supporters were mostly formed among the modern bourgeoisie, some merchants, the modern middle class, a small segment of the clergy, and some segments of students and teachers. On the other side of the political spectrum there emerged two major left-wing guerrilla organizations espousing revolutionary Islamic ideology: Mojahedin-e Khalq Organization (MKO) and the Marxist Fadaian. The MKO, established in 1965, was a revolutionary Muslim organization that reinterpreted Shi’a Islam through the lens of Marxism. The Organization of People’s Fadaian Guerrillas (OPFG), formed in 1971, was a Marxist-Leninist revolutionary organization independent of the Soviet Union and Communist China. The militant ideology of both organisations deemed armed struggle against the state as both tactically and strategically necessary. It was argued that armed struggle could mobilize the people by making the regime vulnerable in the eyes of the public, paving the way for a popular revolution. This leftist ideology was attractive to some segments of university students, intellectuals, and workers. In addition to the left-wing guerrilla organizations, the militant clergy and their *bazaari* allies formed right-wing religious guerrilla organizations. These included the Coalition of Islamic Associations (Hey’at ha ye Mo’talefe-ye Islami), which maintained links to the guerrilla group Devotees of Islam (Fedaiyan-e Islam), and forged informal ties with Ayatollah Khomeini. Formed in 1963, the Fedaiyan-e Islam was behind the assassination of the Shah’s Prime Minister Hasan-Ali Mansour in 1965.⁷⁰

Given the diversity of political forces in pre-revolutionary Iran, it is misleading to suggest that there was an essentialist, monolithic, wholesale, and unified concept of Islam as politics. The revolutionary movement was made of a populist coalition of left, right, religious, and secular trends as well as liberal and socialist groups. Out of this situation emerged a set of ideas and ideologies that mobilized the people. The question, however, remains: Why did Khomeinism come to dominate the revolution in 1978–1979?

The Domination of Khomeinism

Radicalism and populist-Islamism contributed to the rise and popularity of Khomeinism. Khomeinism was a revolutionary discourse, and radicalism was the hegemonic political culture of the 1960s and 1970s. The formation of an autocratic state in post-1953 Iran had obstructed all peaceful paths to democracy, successfully destroying the weak democratic and secular political institutions in Iran. Moreover, the failure of the Shah's autocratic modernization and the decline of secular (nationalist and leftist) groups in the late 1960s contributed to the rise of an alternative Islamic discourse.

Khomeini was certainly a radical and revolutionary cleric in the late 1970s, but he was not always a revolutionary Ayatollah. Like most clerics, Ayatollah Khomeini – in particular, before 1963 – believed in the traditional quietism of Shi'i Islam. Neither the 1963 uprising nor the early years of exile turned Khomeini into a radical and revolutionary thinker. He was a constitutionalist, but in the 1970s emerged as a radical leader of the opposition because his discourse was increasingly fraught with modernist concepts that were politically relevant to the revolutionary conditions that existed in Iran.

Moreover, Ayatollah Khomeini succeeded in incorporating a set of modern ideas and new cultural idioms that were foreign to traditional Islam. He adopted ideas developed by progressive Muslim thinkers and even secular intellectuals that went beyond the traditional purview of the clerical orthodoxy in Iran. As discussed previously, the ideas of lay intellectuals such as Jalal al-Ahmad, whose pamphlet “Gharbzadegi” called for a return to Islamic roots, and Ali Shariati, whose attractive modern idioms appealed to the urban middle class influenced Ayatollah Khomeini's transition from a traditional Ayatollah to a revolutionary one whose ideas appealed to a wider section of the Iranian populace. Undoubtedly, on the eve of the revolution, the young urban middle class, intellectuals, and students considered Ayatollah Khomeini a charismatic leader who would realise the aims of the revolution – particularly egalitarianism and social justice.^{[71](#)}

As I have argued so far, during the 1960s and 1970s political culture in Iran became increasingly radicalized. Under the Shah's reign of terror and in the absence of any peaceful constitutional channels to reform the regime, the political arena was ripe for revolution. This radicalism was partly shaped by discourses emphasizing nationalism and anti-imperialism, and populist ideas emphasizing social justice. There was also the influence of Third Worldism: the doctrine of popular Third World revolutionary movements that were so central to many revolutionary struggles in the 1960s and 1970s. Khomeinism as a political ideology reflected all of these trends of Iranian radicalism, and successfully merged them into a hegemonic ideology powerful enough to spearhead a broad revolutionary movement.

The success of Khomeinism overshadowed progressive ideas introduced by modern intellectuals, and requires some clarification. Khomeinism was a mixture of ideas and a marriage of opposites, as Ayatollah Khomeini and his close circle of clerics hired (if not hijacked) modern progressive idioms. They utilized political concepts or intellectual expressions introduced by both the secular

intelligentsia and progressive Muslim intellectuals – and particularly those of Ali Shariati – incorporating them into a hybrid discourse permeated by Third Worldist themes, populism, radicalism, and Islamism.

Ali Shariati died from a massive heart attack in London in June 1977, just prior to the revolution. Amidst the revolutionary upheaval and in his absence, the authentic meaning of his ideas, which were based on a radical deconstruction of Islamic thought, were lost. Henceforth, Shariati's words and idioms were applied outside of their original intellectual and political context. As a result, his discourse was manipulated to fit the politics of the day, partly because of its partial and improper use within the hegemonic discourse of Khomeinism. On the eve of the revolution, Shariati's discourse – like other non-clerical discourses – was not institutionalised; nor was it carried forward by a single charismatic leader. Because Shariati had opposed the political (autocratic) and religious (conservative) establishments, he was attacked from both sides. Consequently, he did not establish a political organization of his own, nor did he use the traditional institutions controlled by the clergy. Thus, his death led to confusion and misrepresentation of his ideology.

The Traditional Institutions

“Due to the weakness of civil society under sultanism,” Chehabi and Linz argue, “religious organizations and in the end organized religion become a major locus of oppositional activity as they provide support, resources, and leadership.”⁷² Contrary to conventional wisdom, the traditional clerical institutions experienced growth and influence under the Shah's regime. The regime suppressed modern opposition with far more consistency than traditional groups, who benefited from the nationwide network of mosques, theological seminaries, religious shrines, charitable endowments, and religious lecture halls. The clergy in particular could perform a variety of ceremonial, judicial, and social-welfare functions and remained able to publish a number of religious journals. In short, the resources and opportunities available to the *ulama* were denied others in the opposition.⁷³ The Cold War and the legacy of the 1953 coup pushed the Shah's regime into even more ruthless suppression of the progressive left and the liberal opposition. Given “the relative sanctuary of the mosque,” the Khomeinists increasingly succeeded in filling the institutional gap because they were in a position to maintain their institutional independence because of their own economic and political resources.⁷⁴ Historically, the institutions of the clergy possessed a significant degree of autonomy from the state. They controlled religious endowment institutions (*awqaf*) in schools, mosques, shrines, and hospitals. The clerical establishment also maintained direct control over religious taxes such as one-fifth of the agricultural and commercial profits (*khums*), taxes on various categories of wealth (*zakat*), and taxes on voluntary charitable payments (*sadaqe*).

Why did the traditional establishment cooperate with Khomeini, whose political discourse broke the long history of quietism by challenging the official policy of the Shi'i establishment? Why did the quietist clerical institutions provide Ayatollah Khomeini with organizational resources? Why did they eventually join the revolution? There are two ways to address these questions. First, the Shah's arrogant neo-sultanistic approach eventually turned the clerical establishment into an active opposition. The creation of the Literacy Corps was regarded as a challenge to the traditional role of the clergy in the educational system,⁷⁵ and the Shah cancelled monthly payments to clerical students after the White Revolution in the 1960s. In 1967, the *majlis* passed the Family Protection Law, which undermined both the *shariah* and social clout of the clerical institutions.⁷⁶ In the mid-1970s, the regime closed down some religious institutions and lecture halls – namely the Faiziyeh seminary in

Qom, the Hedayat mosque, and Hosseinieh Ershad in Tehran.⁷⁷ The regime dissolved all university-based religious student associations, forbade some religious figures from delivering public lectures, and shut down a number of religious publishing centres.⁷⁸ At the same time, the Shah's regime – despite its harshness – was unable to control the nation's approximately 90,000 clerics or shut down all the mosques and religious institutions.⁷⁹ The relative economic and political autonomy of the clerical establishment helped the clergy as an institution to survive and serve Khomeini's revolutionary purpose.

Conversely, secular constitutionalists, progressive Muslims, liberals, and socialists experienced institutional decline in the 1960s and 1970s. The national bourgeoisie suffered from the state's autocratic structural transformation and integration into the world economy. In the post-coup era, the secular-constitutionalists lost their organizational power. The Shah's secret police and military apparatus destroyed practically all organized secular political groups such as the liberal National Front and the Marxist Tudeh Party. Similarly, the Islamic Mojahedin and Marxist Fadaian guerrilla organizations were demolished by the secret police. On the eve of the revolution, they held neither a large social base nor the sufficient resources for an effective and viable political organization. As a result, the Khomeinist factions filled the institutional gap among the opponents of the Shah's regime.

Charismatic Leadership

"In traditional societies," Max Weber writes, "charisma is the real revolutionary force."⁸⁰ For Weber, the test of charisma is the recognition of the leader by his followers.⁸¹ This recognition goes beyond the leader's personal character and qualifications, and relies on the social conditions within which charisma is "awakened and tested."⁸² In a society where religion had played a significant part in shaping public opinion, Khomeini's charisma was partly a product of his religious status. Khomeini was respected as a Grand Ayatollah, but he remained ineffective in leading socio-political changes because of his exile. The revolutionary conditions of the late 1970s, however, transformed him into a popular leader with a broad base amongst the revolutionary movements.

According to Max Weber, when spiritual "disenchantment" takes place in "moments of distress – whether psychic, physical, economic, ethical, religious, or political" – society needs "re-enchantment," or an "otherworldly" experience.⁸³ As Durkheim observed, in such times the need for re-enchantment that is sometimes fulfilled by charismatic leadership is because of increasing "anomie" or moral/spiritual isolation brought about by the process of rapid modernization.⁸⁴ Similarly, Antonio Gramsci suggested that at a "certain point in their historical lives, social classes become detached from their traditional parties."⁸⁵ At this point, "the field is open for violent solutions, for the activities of unknown forces, represented by charismatic 'men of destiny.'"⁸⁶ History suggests that such charismatic men of destiny are by-products of a mass society. William Kornhauser added:

The phenomenon of mass society springs from a double crisis: on one level it is a crisis of alienation resulting from the rapid introduction of new cultural symbols for which the population is unprepared; on another it ensues from conditions of institutional fragmentation making "elites ... readily accessible to ... non-elites and non-elites ... readily available for mobilization by elites."⁸⁷

The crisis of mass society in pre-revolutionary Iran hence compelled the new middle class to accept and appreciate Khomeini's charismatic leadership. "While not as profound as that which swept Germany during the forties," Daniel Brumberg stated in this regard, "Iran's crisis was sufficiently disruptive to impel nearly all urban social groups to mobilize in their quest for charismatic experience and leadership."⁸⁸

Both structural and symbolic forces set the stage for the successful experience of Khomeini's charisma. The Shah's cultural policy of pre-Islamic nationalism and unequal relations with the West contributed to the deepening sense of Gharbzadegi.⁸⁹ The Shah had undermined all secular institutions and pushed all "urban groups – intellectuals, *bazaaris*, students, and the lower middleclass *mostaz'afin* – to seek refuge in mass arenas such as the religious seminaries, universities, mosques, and ultimately the *streets themselves*."⁹⁰ Khomeini emerged armed with Shi'i cultural symbols and clerical institutions in order to lead this mass movement. A combination of the sudden and mysterious death of his son Mostafa in October 1977; the publication of an insulting article published in *Ettela'at* daily newspaper that described Khomeini as a British agent and mad Indian poet; the Jaleh Square demonstration on September 9, 1978; and the death of protesters all fuelled the revolutionary movement, and placed Khomeini in a position to lead the people.

Social crisis, Max Weber indicates, creates a non-rational need for charismatic experiences and revolutionary change. Ayatollah Khomeini's charisma was both cultural and political in character. His religious authority allowed his followers to transform the nature of a political movement into a test of the religious emotion of the people in confronting the Shah's regime. This sentiment was encapsulated in chants such as "History witnessed three idol-breakers: Abraham Khalilollah, Mohammad Rasoullollah, and Khomeini Ruhollah," which placed Khomeini on an equal footing with the prophets Abraham and Mohammad.⁹¹ Such popular sentiments allowed Ayatollah Khomeini to assemble a wide spectrum of social forces behind him. He was an unusually unorthodox Ayatollah, and a personification of many syntheses and contradictions. To the people he represented, he appeared traditional. To the young and idealistic Iranian intelligentsia, he represented unorthodoxy and resistance. In this way, his political message reached members of all social classes.

Conclusion

Ayatollah Khomeini was himself both synthesizer and synthesis. His life was full of contradictions, and his thinking and ideology evolved over five distinct stages across almost half a century. Young Khomeini contested monarchic rule but did not challenge the institution of monarchy: he remained a constitutionalist. His first public statement came in a book published in 1943/1944. The book, entitled *Kashf-e Asrar (The Discovery of Secrets)*, was essentially a detailed and systematic critique of an anti-religious tract. In *Kashf-e Asrar*, Khomeini argued that the clergy should provide legal and moral guidance and not become politically active. In return, the clergy expected respect for the *shariah* and clerical establishment. Khomeini's real entry into politics came in 1962–1963, after the inauguration of the Shah's reforms known as the White Revolution. Despite the events of 1963, Khomeini's view as a constitutionalist remained unchanged until the 1970s. The revolutionary conditions in Iran transformed Khomeini from a quietest constitutionalist cleric into a revolutionary Ayatollah. He became at the same time a consequence and an engineer of Iran's revolutionary conditions.

For centuries, the clerical establishment including the young Khomeini lived under monarchy. Khomeini the revolutionary, however, broke this tradition. The monarchy, he argued, was a legacy of polytheism (*shirk*).⁹² For a true Muslim – who believes in monotheism (*towhid*) and subordinates to

God alone – this was unacceptable. To Khomeini the revolutionary, political resistance against all idolatry (*taqut*), either in the form of a domestic despot such as the Shah or an arrogant foreign power (*estekbar*), became a religious obligation. More importantly, his populist Third World revolutionary discourse appealed to many social forces in the late 1970s. As Abrahamian indicates:

He sprinkled his declarations with radical sound bites that were later adopted as revolutionary street slogans: Islam belongs to the oppressed (*mostazafin*), not to the oppressors (*mostakberin*).

Islam represents the slum-dwellers (*zaghehneshin*), not the palace-dwellers (*kakhneshin*).

Islam is not the opiate of the masses.

The poor die for the revolution, the rich plot against the revolution.

The oppressed (*mostazafin*) of the world, unite.

[...]

The duty of the clergy is to liberate the poor from the clutches of the rich.⁹³

¹ His first public statement came in *Kashf-e Asrar (The Discovery of Secrets)*, where he sought a supervisory (*nezarat*) role for the *ulama*. This was in accord with Article 2 of the 1906 constitution, suggested by Shaykh Fazlollah Nouri, which provided for a clerical committee to supervise laws passed by the *Majlis* (parliament).

² Mehdi Moslem, *Factional Politics in Post-Khomeini Iran* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2002), p. 74.

³ More importantly, Article 109 of the amended constitution separated the position of the *marji`a* from that of the *faqih*; setting the stage for the selection of a new *vali-ye faqih* who could be a middle-ranking cleric. Paradoxically, the priority Khomeini granted to the interests of the state led him to revive his own theory of the *velayat-e faqih* by reducing the theological qualifications needed, and separating the position of the *marji`a* from that of the *faqih*.

⁴ See Ervand Abrahamian, *Khomeinism: Essays on the Islamic Republic* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993).

⁵ William H. Sewell Jr., “Ideologies and Social Revolutions: Reflections on the French Case,” *Journal of Modern History*, 57 (1985), pp. 57–85, p. 60.

[6](#) Steven Lukes, *Essays in Social Theory* (London: Macmillan, 1977), p. 29.

[7](#) Richard Snyder, “Paths out of Sultanistic Regimes: Combining Structural and Voluntarist Perspectives” in H. E. Chehabi and Juan J. Linz (eds.) *Sultanistic Regimes*, (Baltimore, MD: The John Hopkins University Press, 1998), pp. 59–60.

[8](#) Homa Katouzian, “The Pahlavi Regime in Iran” in H. E. Chehabi and Juan J. Linz (eds.) *Sultanistic Regimes* (London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1998), p. 187.

[9](#) [Ibid.](#), p. 187.

[10](#) [Ibid.](#), p. 187.

[11](#) [Ibid.](#), p. 188.

[12](#) Ervand Abrahamian, *A History of Modern Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 140.

[13](#) Ervand Abrahamian, *Iran between Two Revolutions* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), p. 444.

[14](#) [Ibid.](#), p. 444. In February 1975, the Shah changed the official calendar of the country from its base, the migration of the Prophet Muhammad from Mecca to Medina (*Hejri*), to the start of the Achaemenian monarchical reign in what came to be known as the Shahanshahi calendar date.

- [15](#) Ervand Abrahamian, *Radical Islam: The Iranian Mojahedin* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1989), p.17.
- [16](#) Hossein Bashiriyeh, *The State and Revolution in Iran, 1962–1982* (Beckenham: Croom Helm, 1983), p. 92.
- [17](#) H. E. Chehabi and Juan J. Linz (eds.) *Sultanistic Regimes*, (Baltimore, MD: The John Hopkins University Press, 1998), p. 20.
- [18](#) Ali Mirsepassi, *Intellectual Discourse and the Politics of Modernization: Negotiating Modernity in Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 76.
- [19](#) Theda Skocpol, *Social Revolutions in the Modern World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 245.
- [20](#) Anthony Parsons, *The Pride and the Fall: Iran, 1974–79* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1984), p. 19.
- [21](#) Asadollah Alam, *The Shah and I*, Alinaghi Alikhani, ed. (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 1991), p. 233.
- [22](#) Theda Skocpol, *Social Revolutions in the Modern World*, p. 244.
- [23](#) David Jorjani, “Revolution in the Semi-Periphery: The Case of Iran” in Terry Boswell (ed.) *Revolution in the World System* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1989), p. 136.
- [24](#) Abrahamian, *Iran between Two Revolutions*, pp. 419–448.

[25](#) [Ibid.](#), p. 427.

[26](#) Abrahamian, *Radical Islam*, p. 17.

[27](#) John Foran, *Fragile Resistance: Social Transformation in Iran from 1500 to the Revolution* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1993), p. 67.

[28](#) Abrahamian, *Radical Islam*, p.17.

[29](#) Ali Mirsepassi, *Intellectual Discourse and the Politics of Modernization*, p. 75. Within a decade (1966–1976), Iran’s urban population rose from 38 percent to 47 percent, and major cities received more than 2 million rural migrants: “The tide of landless peasants pouring into the cities in search of work rose from around 30,000 a year in the 1930s and 130,000 annually from 1941 to 1956, to 250,000 a year for 1957–1966 and 330,000 a year between 1967 and 1976.” (See John Foran, *Fragile Resistance: Social Transformation in Iran from 1500 to the Revolution*, p. 337).

[30](#) John Foran, “The Iranian Revolution of 1977–79: A Challenge for Social Theory” in John Foran (ed.) *A Century of Revolution: Social Movements in Iran* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), pp. 167–168.

[31](#) Farhad Kazemi, *Poverty and Revolution in Iran: The Migrants Poor, Urban Marginality and Politics* (New York: New York View Press, 1980), p. 45.

[32](#) Abrahamian, *Iran between Two Revolutions*, p. 447.

[33](#) Foran, “The Iranian Revolution of 1977–79: A Challenge for Social Theory,” pp. 167–168.

[34](#) [Ibid.](#)

[35](#) Richard Snyder, “Paths out of Sultanistic Regimes: Combining Structural and Voluntarist Perspectives,” p. 58.

[36](#) Foran, “The Iranian Revolution of 1977–79: A Challenge for Social Theory,” pp. 170–171.

[37](#) Fred Halliday, *Iran, Dictatorship and Development* (Middlesex: Penguin Books Ltd., 1979), p. 252.

[38](#) [Ibid.](#), pp. 266–280.

[39](#) Karl Marx, “The Eighteen Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte” in R. C. Tucker (ed.) *The Marx-Engels Reader* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1978).

[40](#) Steven Lukes, *Essays in Social Theory*, p. 29.

[41](#) Michael Taylor, “Structure, Culture, and Action in the Explanation of Social Change” in William Booth et al. (eds.) *Politics and Rationality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 123.

[42](#) Ann Swidler, “Culture in Action: Symbols and Strategies,” *American Sociological Review*, 51 (1986), p. 283.

[43](#) [Ibid.](#)

[44](#) [Ibid.](#), p. 279.

[45](#) Clifford Geertz, *Islam Observed: Religious Development in Morocco and Indonesia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968), p. 61.

[46](#) Ann Swidler, “Culture in Action: Symbols and Strategies,” p. 283.

[47](#) See also John Foran, *A Century of Revolution: Social Movements in Iran*, pp. 173–175; Valentine Moghadam, “Islamic Populism, Class, and Gender in Post-Revolutionary Iran” in Foran (ed.) *A Century of Revolution: Social Movements in Iran*, pp. 189–222 and Daniel Brumberg, *Reinventing Khomeini: The Struggle for Reform in Iran* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001).

[48](#) Khomeinism refashioned and institutionalized a modern theocracy. As Abrahamian observes, the “whole constitutional structure of the Islamic Republic was modeled less on the early caliphate than on de Gaulle’s Fifth Republic.” Abrahamian, *Khomeinism*, p. 15.

[49](#) Said Amir Arjomand, “Authority in Shiism and Constitutional Development in the Islamic Republic of Iran” in Rainer Brunner and Werner Ende (eds.) *The Twelver Shia in the Modern Times: Religious Culture and Political History* (Brill, Netherlands: Tuta Pallace, 2001), p. 301.

[50](#) Ruhollah Khomeini, “Islamic Government” in Hamid Algar (ed., trans.) *Islam and Revolution : Writings and Declarations of Imam Khomeini (1941–1980)*, (London: Mizan Press, 1981) p. 55.

[51](#) [Ibid.](#)

[52](#) Although Khomeini's interpretation of the theory of the *velayat-e faqih* was new, the concept was not new to the Shi'i tradition. For an insightful discussion, see Farhang Rajaee, *Khomeini on Man, the State and International Politics* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1983).

[53](#) Khomeini, "Islamic Government," p. 75.

[54](#) *Ibid.*, p. 124.

[55](#) Sami Zubaida, *Islam, the People and the State: Political Ideas and Movements in the Middle East* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2009), pp. 16–17.

[56](#) Khomeini, "Islamic Government," p. 42.

[57](#) Huzeh-e Elmiyeh, *Zendeginameh-e Imam Khomeini (A Biography of Imam Khomeini)* (Tehran, n.d.), p. 95.

[58](#) Bashiriyeh, *State and Revolution in Iran, 1962–1982*, pp. 59–60.

[59](#) Ruhollah Khomeini, *Khomeini va Jonbesh: Majmueh-ye Nameha va Sokhanraniha (A Collection of Khomeini's Letters and Speeches)* (Tehran: 1352/1973), pp. 58–60; 68–69.

[60](#) Ruhollah Khomeini, "October 31, 1971, The Incompatibility of Monarchy with Islam" in Algar (ed., trans.) *Islam and Revolution 1: Writings and Declarations of Imam Khomeini (1941–1980)*, p 202.

[61](#) Roy Mottahedeh, *The Mantle of the Prophet: Learning and Power in Modern Iran* (London: Chatto

& Windus, 1986), p. 303.

[62](#) Abrahamian, *Iran between Two Revolutions*, p. 473.

[63](#) Ali Rahnema, *An Islamic Utopian: A Political Biography of Ali Shari'ati* (London: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 1998), p. 370.

[64](#) [Ibid.](#)

[65](#) [Ibid.](#)

[66](#) Ali Shariati, *Collected Works*, vol. x (Tehran: Ferdowsi, 1360/1981), p. 56.

[67](#) Abrahamian, *Radical Islam*, p. 119.

[68](#) [Ibid.](#), pp. 123–124.

[69](#) Mehrzad Boroujerdi, *Iranian Intellectuals and the West: The Tormented Triumph of Nativism* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1996), p. 105.

[70](#) Boroujerdi, *Iranian Intellectuals and the West*, p. 84.

[71](#) Abrahamian, *Iran Between Two Revolutions*, p. 534.

[72](#) H. E. Chehabi and Juan J. Linz, “A Theory of Sultanism 2: Genesis and Demise of Sultanistic Regimes” in Chehabi and Linz (eds.) (Baltimore, MD: The John Hopkins University Press, 1998), *Sultanistic Regimes*, p. 42.

[73](#) Valentine Moghadam, “Populist Revolution and the Islamic State in Iran” in Terry Boswell (ed.) *Revolution in the World System* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1989), p. 153.

[74](#) In the early 1970s, Ali Shariati and a few other Muslim intellectuals held their lectures in the Hosseinieh Ershad – a modern Islamic institution in Northern Tehran where most of the audience were university students. However, this was a short-lived opportunity because the regime closed the institute in the 1970s, and Shariati was imprisoned and banned for life from giving public lectures in the last four years of his life (1973–1977).

[75](#) Shahroukh Akhavi, *Religion and Politics in Contemporary Iran: Clergy-State Relations in the Pahlavi Period* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1980), p. 98.

[76](#) Abrahamian, *Iran between Two Revolutions*, p. 444.

[77](#) Misagh Parsa, *The Social Origins of the Iranian Revolution* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1989), p. 196.

[78](#) Abrahamian, *Iran between Two Revolutions*, p. 444.

[79](#) Foran, *Fragile Resistance, Social Transformation in Iran from 1500 to the Revolution*, p. 337.

[80](#) Max Weber, *Economy and Society*, vol. i (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1978), p. 245.

[81](#) *Ibid.*, p. 242.

[82](#) *Ibid.*, p. 249.

[83](#) *Ibid.*, pp. 1111–1112.

[84](#) Kenneth Thompson (ed.), *Readings from Emile Durkheim* (Chichester: Ellis Harwood, 1985), p. 129.

[85](#) Antonio Gramsci in Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (eds., trans.) *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (New York: International Publishers, 1971), p. 210, quoted in Daniel Brumberg, *Reinventing Khomeini: The Struggle for Reform in Iran* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001), p. 25.

[86](#) See Brumberg, *Reinventing Khomeini*, pp. 25–26.

[87](#) *Ibid.*, p. 90; Brumberg's argument is taken from William Kornhauser, *The Politics of Mass Society* (New York: Free Press, 1969), p. 39.

[88](#) Brumberg, *Reinventing Khomeini*, p. 90.

[89](#) *Ibid.*, p. 91.

[90](#) [Ibid.](#), p. 92.

[91](#) See Said Amir Arjomand, *The Turban for the Crown: The Islamic Revolution in Iran* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 104.

[92](#) Ruhollah Khomeini, speech, *Ettela'at*, December 2, 1985, quoted in Abrahamian, *A History of Modern Iran*, p. 147.

[93](#) Abrahamian, *A History of Modern Iran*, p. 148.

3 Wilayat al-Faqih and the Meaning of Islamic Government

Amr GE Sabet

Introduction

The triumph of the Islamic revolution of Iran in February 1979 surprised many observers, and continues to baffle others today. The introduction into contemporary politics of a religious dimension challenged contemporary understandings of the human condition in ways that have called into question much of the basic premises of modern secularism. The revolution tended to be perceived largely in light of the preconceptions and predispositions of the observer rather than as something original and unique – *sui generis*. Many failed to see the revolution as a phenomenon that is to be understood and comprehended from within its own dynamics and on its own terms, rather than in terms of mere Western social science categories (insightful as they may be). Consequently, varied designations were and continue to be attributed to the Iranian state; ranging from it being a form of “anachronistic theocracy” to being pejoratively referred to as the “rule of the *mullahs*” or a “religious dictatorship”.

Such attitudes oversimplify highly complex issues and reflect an ideological prejudice and/or lack of comprehension. The deep impact that this revolutionary phenomenon had and continues to have on the Muslim community, both Sunni and Shi'i, renders it a profound social, political as well as religious innovation that combines the twin elements of religious reasoning (*ijtihad*) and renewal (*tajdid*). Both elements were infused with the praxis dimension, beyond mere theoretical constructs, through the theory of *Wilayat al-Faqih* and the person of *al-Faqih* represented by Grand Ayatollah Khomeini.

Although steeped in Shi'i Imamite tradition, Imam Khomeini did not perceive himself a mere representative within the confines of this particular school of thought. In addition to proclaiming to represent all Muslims, he in fact challenged and transformed much of the ideas within the Shi'i tradition. Khomeini attempted to transcend sectarian divides, subtly steering Shi'ism closer to Sunnism by calling for an Islamic government to be ruled by a just *faqih*, and not necessarily the infallible Imam.¹ In this sense, Khomeini was a *mujtahid*; a creative mind and figure; an innovator and a *mujadid* (renewer) in addition to being a source of emulation (*marja-e taqlid*). It was natural therefore that there would be significant divergences associated not only with the impositions of revolutionary conditions, but also with those of doctrinal innovation. In fact, observing the actions and doctrinal interpretations of different groups and actors during the earlier days of the revolutionary upheaval, Shahrugh Akhavi described them as “so divergent that it often comes as a surprise to recall that Shi'ism is ... their common reference”.² This chapter will examine the writings and ideas of Khomeini as they pertain to his conceptualization of the role of religion and governance. It will also elaborate on the concept of *Wilayat al-Faqih* (governance of the jurisprudent) as the leadership principle which links Islam to politics. This analysis will also cover how the concept provided a reinterpreted framework that articulated an activist agenda for the *fuqaha* (jurisprudence) beyond traditional Shi'i quietism (awaiting).

Religion and Governance in the Writings of Imam Khomeini

Quietism, or the principle of *intizar*, raised existential problems for the Shi'i community that would persist until fairly recently. They were related to the basic question, "When would the Imam come forward to establish justice and equity on earth",³ and who was to lead and guide the Muslim community during the absence of the Twelfth Imam? The history of the Shi'i, as a matter of fact, could "be described as continual wrestling for an answer to this question".⁴ Imam Khomeini's writings on Islamic governance and his elaboration of the concept of *Wilayat al-Faqih* constituted not only the most recent but also the most serious and substantive effort to address this seemingly perennial problem of leadership.

In a series of lectures given at the holy city of Najaf in Iraq between January and February 1970, Imam Khomeini sought to expound the theory of Islamic government and its concomitant concept of *Wilayat al-Faqih*.⁵ The latter reflected the singular principle which served to fuse religion and politics through the medium of the *faqih*. It innovatively addressed the question of who is legitimately qualified to rule during the occultation of the Shi'i Twelfth Imam as well as the breadth and domain of such rule beyond the mere spiritual and legal to encompass the political.⁶

Earlier Shi'i scholars had assumed for themselves a good measure (albeit restricted) of authority (*wilayah*) over their community in order to meet its religious, spiritual, legal and practical needs. These needs were related to teaching Islam, judging, conducting *jihad*, collecting religious taxes (*zakat*, *khums*), trusteeship over minors and the insane, and a host of other related legal and social matters.⁷ Beyond these duties, however, lay the right to "sovereign" rule in Shi'i Imamate tradition, which was highly predicated on the notion of the infallibility (*'isma*) of the ruler; that is, on the prerequisite of absolute justice (*'adl*) that only a particular caliber of individuals could claim. There was general acknowledgment that despite any measure of piety, the *fuqaha* (sgl. *faqih*) could not claim infallibility, which was the sole provenance of Prophet Muhammad and the Twelve Imams. Although developing a discourse which emphasized the faithful among their followers were obligated to obey religious rulings (*fatawa*, sgl. *fatwa*) they made, in the absence of the hidden Imam, none of the Shi'i *fuqaha* could arrogate to themselves the right to rule. As such, "the wilaya transferred from the Imam to the jurists had ... highly specific and well-delineated traditional connotations".⁸ Khomeini was to challenge this understanding by extending the concept of *wilayah* to incorporate the right to political rule (i.e., governance). He was in fact re-politicizing Shi'ism, and thus transcending the principle of *intizar*.

There were serious implications for such an innovation. In so doing, Khomeini was not only establishing the case for the "sovereignty of the jurist", but also formulating such authority as identical with that of the Prophet and the infallible Imam.⁹ But this did not mean that Khomeini was equating the jurist with these figures. He was quite explicit in clarifying that when he spoke of "same authority", he was not referring to "status" but to "function".¹⁰ Khomeini was essentially making a claim to their governing prerogatives (i.e., political leadership), and relaxing the condition of infallibility. This tended to move him closer to the Sunni position that did not require the latter stipulation. All that was needed as far as the Sunnis were concerned – notwithstanding subsequent pragmatic Sunni laxity about such conditions – was that the ruler be just and committed to the *shariah* (Islamic law). All this constituted a challenge to the traditional Shi'i requisite of infallibility, as well as to the notion of quietism, as Khomeini was in effect doing away with the duality of religio-legal and temporal authority.¹¹

In this regard, it is important to note that the frequent allusion to Khomeini as "Imam" by his loyal

followers referred to leadership, and was never understood as a hint or intimation to the hidden Twelfth Imam. To the extent that there was any association made between them, it was in reference to Khomeini as the “deputy” of the Imam (*Na’eb-e Imam*).¹² The praxis of Khomeini underscored that *intizar* should not be construed as the passive awaiting for the return of the Imam, but as “an active effort of preparing the way” for such a return¹³ – hence, *Wilayat al-Faqih* as deputyship. As Said Arjomand states: “The Hidden Imam all but reappeared in the form of an omnipotent deputy, the Sovereign Jurist”.¹⁴ The former designation was eventually dropped in common everyday usage. It was in this sense that Khomeini was synonymously referred to as *rahbar-e enqelab* (leader of the revolution) and *vali-ye faqih*¹⁵ (Imam and *vali-ye faqih* were used interchangeably).

Khomeini’s impeccable credentials as a religious authority, as well as his charisma and revolutionary leadership, were certainly all crucial in making such profound innovations possible despite significant opposition from other equally eminent religious figures. However, it was a particular historical development which had furnished the ground for an environment permitting of such dynamism and *ijtihad* (religious reasoning). Competition between two variant schools of thought dating back to the late eighteenth century, and the eventual triumph of one school over the other by the nineteenth century, lent more power and authority to the Shi’i *ulema* (religious scholars). One rather more “traditionalist” school, known as the Akhbaris, argued for sole reliance on reports (*akhbar*) pertaining to the Prophet and the Imams. There was no need for the *ulema* to interpret them, as any Shi’i with a modicum of religious knowledge could presumably understand them on his or her own. As a corollary to this position, the Akhbaris further challenged claims to any special position for the *ulema* as *mujtahideen* (sgl. *mujtahid*) or interpreters of the faith and tradition. By contesting claims to the “collective representation of the Hidden Imam”¹⁶, the Akhbaris were in fact weakening the role of the *ulema* in their community’s affairs. The Akhbaris, however, were to decisively lose out to their Usuli rivals by the nineteenth century.

The Usulis, among whom Khomeini is counted, were inclined toward rationalist theology and stressed the necessity of *ijtihad* or reasoning, on the basis of the foundations (*usul*) and binding tenets of the faith.¹⁷ *Mujtahideen* were needed and necessary for explaining these matters, much of which could be incomprehensible to the less knowledgeable. They were the ones most competent to interpret the faith and guide the believers. By the same token, the latter were expected to follow or emulate a living *mujtahid* (i.e., *marja-e taqlid* or source of emulation), as opposed to one who had died, unless no acknowledged *marja’* existed at that time.¹⁸ This requirement had much to do with the recognition that the *mujtahideen*, being the most qualified custodians of the faith were, however, not infallible and therefore liable to err or make rulings that may not be relevant in different times. Emulating a living *mujtahid* therefore could rectify such shortcomings if and whenever necessary.

Unlike the Sunni *ulema*, who were and continue to be more inclined to appeal to the authority of their predecessors rather than their own, in ways similar to the Akhbaris, an Usuli Shi’i *mujtahid* can in fact appeal to his own authority when making a ruling, issuing a fatwa, or exercising *ijtihad*. Therefore, Khomeini’s elaboration on this nascent idea of absolute authority of the *faqih* is to be understood within this context and by no means as a form of or a call for absolutism as such. Rather, it was to be the framework within which the *faqih* could have the full authority to exercise *ijtihad* as well as religio-politics in line with the requirements of contemporary times rather than stagnated traditions.¹⁹ The ensuing political and regime structure and process that evolved both during Khomeini’s time and after his death in 1989 was thus described by Said Arjomand as “neither a democracy nor a dictatorship” but reflective more of the “distinctive and contradictory goals of the Islamic revolution”.²⁰ By cutting through this dichotomy, the Iranian Islamic revolution may have

discovered a “third way”.

The triumph of the Usuli school, galvanized by the ideas circulating in the Iraqi city of Najaf among many non-Iranian clerics (for instance, Aqa Muhammad Baqer Bihbahani²¹), significantly increased the influence and dynamism of the Shi’i *ulema* in ways that their Sunni counterparts could never truly match. According to Nikki Keddie, “There was now a clear doctrinal basis for appeals to the ulama over the head of a ruler, and for claims by the leading mujtahids to make political decisions provided they touched on Islamic principles, independently of temporal rulers”.²²

Khomeini’s Discourse: Doctrine and Reason

By the late twentieth century, the ground had already been laid for Imam Khomeini to make his authoritative contribution to Islamic government. His lectures in Najaf buttressed Usuli rationalist theological arguments regarding the necessity of such a government under the aegis of *Wilayat al-Faqih*. The two interrelated notions were justified by resorting to reason as well as religious doctrine. Khomeini in fact was a twentieth-century heir of a tenth-century Shi’i tradition that linked salvation to the confluence of faith (*iman*), reason (*’aql*) and knowledge (*’ilm*).²³ To which he added contemporary praxis (*’amal*). His lectures reflected those elements as he underscored three main themes. The first theme aimed at developing the discursive justification for an Islamic government with all its concomitant institutions, and for the centrality of Islamic politics. The second proceeded to make the case for the rule of the jurist, and it is here that Khomeini expounds his conceptual doctrine of *Wilayat al-Faqih*; again on the basis of reason, but more so on a broad deliberation of religious texts and traditions. Finally, the third subject matter elaborates on the course of action to be pursued in order to realize the goals and objectives stipulated in earlier themes (i.e., political praxis).²⁴

Although recourse to primary religious sources pervaded all of these themes, in the first one Khomeini attempted to provide a rational basis for the necessity of having an Islamic government. When he began from the premise that the principle of *Wilayat al-Faqih* required little “demonstration” and was “self-evident”,²⁵ he was not necessarily overstretching his case. In fact, and despite any distinguishing emphasis between Sunni notions of the Caliphate and the Shi’i Imamite counterparts, both nevertheless converged on the point that the ruler should be just, pious, sufficiently aware of and committed to his faith, and willing and capable of implementing the *shariah*. Khomeini, in other words, did not put forth a Shi’i concept that fell beyond the pale of general Islamic consensus. The fact that the Sunnis relaxed much of these requirements over time had more to do with historical developments that compelled them to frequently revise their doctrines under the unfavorable political circumstances.

Another premise that Khomeini stipulated was that simply having a corpus of moral and punitive law is not sufficient in itself, as there must also be an executor and an enforcer which require executive and administrative institutions.²⁶ It was erroneous in other words to speak of Islam as just being a moral system of beliefs when it was relegated to the private realm, particularly when Islam (unlike Christianity) incorporated a body of divine law. This being the case, the preservation and implementation of law and morality required a “coercive” apparatus in the form of a government. Khomeini’s argument in favor of such a state-centered sovereignty is not remarkably dissimilar from any other aimed at justifying the existence of a state in general. However, the difference is substantive in as far as the content of such a state is concerned. It is a state that is to be responsible for its peoples’ good, not only “in this world” but also in the “hereafter”.²⁷ Here again, Khomeini does not seem to be far apart, for instance, from the famous Sunni Muslim historian and sociologist Abdel Rahman

ibn-Khaldun (1332–1406). Ibn Khaldun had also made a clear distinction between “rational” forms of governance solely on the basis of reason and natural law and those on divine law which sought to maintain a balance between both life dimensions – the here and now and the hereafter.²⁸ According to Khomeini, such a government was necessary in order to preserve the Islamic order and defend the independence and territorial integrity of the *ummah* (Muslim community).²⁹ In terms of structure and content, it was to be constitutional not in a positivist sense, but rather in the sense that its rulers as well people were to be constrained by conditions stipulated in the Quran and Islamic traditions. From such premises, in addition to referring to the history of the Prophet’s government in Medina (622–632) and that of Imam Ali (656–661), Khomeini concluded that the necessity of an Islamic government is supported by “reason”, “the law of Islam”, the “practice of the Prophet” and Imam Ali as well as in Quranic verses and Prophetic traditions.³⁰ In those terms, Khomeini defined Islamic government as “the rule of divine law over men”.³¹

The *Wali-e faqih*’s sacred and therefore divinely ordained duty was to preserve this order. Such a conceptualization, however, does engender certain tensions by raising the question of whether the *faqih* owed his position to that divinely ordained role or to the peoples’ acclaim and choice. This tension should not to be confused with the notion of the divine right to rule, for the Shi’i religious field remains polycentric, and the *faqih* – usually of the rank of an Ayatollah – cannot attain that senior position independent of popular acclaim and financial support that the people can withhold in favor of another. In this respect, popular choice continues to feature prominently. The issue nevertheless lies in the balance and extent of the shifting boundaries between the *Wali al-faqih*’s authority and that of popular preferences. This was related to how Imam Khomeini had redefined the role of the *faqih* to embrace “absolute authority” over all other fields extending beyond the mere judicial and/or spiritual to also include the political, economic, and social.³² Although this issue of authority was settled more or less during his time, the matter was brought up again under Ayatollah Khamenei. This was not simply because the latter did not enjoy Khomeini’s standing, but because no one after Khomeini could have enjoyed his undisputed stature. Shortly before his death in early June 1989, Khomeini supported revising the constitution in order to separate the *marja’iyat* from the condition of political leadership, as this was seen to set an extremely high threshold of qualification that could not always be attained. Khomeini stated in a letter to the president of the Assembly for Revising the Constitution in 1989, Ayatollah Ali Akbar Meshkini, that this had been his stance since the early days of the constitution. He added: “[B]ut friends insisted on laying down the condition of the *marja’iyat*. Then I, too, agreed. But at the time I knew that in the not too distant future, it could not be implemented”. Instead, he indicated that a confirmed “righteous or just *mojtahed*” would be sufficient.³³ By relaxing the condition of *marja’iyat* in addition to that of infallibility, Khomeini was converging closer to original Sunni criteria. Unlike Sunnis, however, fallibility was not meant to be a license for the ruler to be tainted with “major sin”.³⁴

In the second theme, Khomeini developed the case for the governance of the jurisprudent. Because of the fact that the Islamic government is a “government of law”, it follows that a ruler “unacquainted with the contents of the law ... is not fit to rule”.³⁵ This is because if the rule is dependent on the religious rulings of others, “his power to govern will be impaired” and he would be nothing more than a “*muqalid*” – an emulator. Alternatively, if he refuses to be guided by such rulings he will be “unable to rule correctly and implement the laws of Islam”.³⁶ Khomeini’s logic seems to proceed as follows: because of the comprehensiveness of the *shariah* that constitutes the basis of an Islamic government, the figure at the helm must be personally well versed and acquainted with its details in theory and practice. This is particularly the case when the ruler is expected to engage in all the

complexities of politics and religion. Only an acknowledged *faqih* could have such training and qualifications, and therefore the ruler should be a *faqih*. But the *faqih* is not to be understood as someone who is simply pious and educated in religious sciences; the competence of the *faqih* necessitates both religious as well as governing capacities. Such conditions are clearly stipulated in the Iranian constitution regarding the “special quality”³⁷ and qualifications of the *faqih*.³⁸ Insofar as these special qualities were concerned, Khomeini was described by his biographer Baqer Moin as a “skilled practitioner of clerical politics”; a “master tactician”; and a “supreme strategist”.³⁹

In addition to reasoning, Khomeini sought to justify his case by falling back on Prophetic traditions (*ahadith*; sgl. *hadith*), which he regarded as supportive of *al-wilayat*. However, Khomeini argued that these traditions require reinterpretation to fit the requirements of contemporary politics. Hamid Mavani has explored the deficiencies within these traditions in one article.⁴⁰ In some ways, even Khomeini had encountered some problems with them pertaining to the extent of their authenticity and what they could realistically be interpreted to mean; for these reasons, he had to build a case for these traditions.⁴¹ Nevertheless, and aside from these reservations, there are another series of more authentic traditions from both Shi’i and Sunni sources which hint at the governance of the jurist, and even insinuate the figure of Khomeini himself. These traditions refer to a man emerging from the city of Qum to lead and unify the people, and indicate that a time will come when men from Persia shall restore the faith. These traditions have at least partially toned down subsequent debates on the legitimacy of the concept of *Wilayat al-Faqih*,⁴² for when Khomeini gave his lectures in Najaf he was certainly attempting to provide a well-reasoned religious articulation for his position. But he was in all probability unaware that he and his followers could perhaps be the subject of the latter class of traditions, and therefore could not have had recourse to them. Only subsequently could he have been aware of the possible connection. Taking note of this is important to better understand this phenomenon as an Islamic historical experience.

Finally, in the third part of his lectures, and like all revolutionary theoreticians and practitioners, Khomeini addressed the crucial question of, “What is to be done”, proposing and articulating an activist agenda for the clergy. He identified “propagation” of the Islamic cause as well as “instruction” of people in the political, economic and legal facets of Islam – not merely in its ritualistic aspects – as his starting point.⁴³ The purpose was to create an “intellectual awakening” that was to develop as a pervasive social “current”, and which would eventually take shape in the form of an organized Islamic movement. The burden of this effort rested mainly on the shoulders of the *fuqaha*, who by so doing would raise the peoples’ religio-political “consciousness”, and only then become the true “citadels of Islam”.⁴⁴ Such an agenda required that the *fuqaha* should refrain from any service in or with governmental institutions of the Shah, and reject any form of cooperation or action that may be construed as supportive of his regime. Khomeini strongly criticized those clerics that chose to stay aloof from politics or serve corrupt governments, designating them as “*akhunds*” (pejorative term for clerics).⁴⁵ According to Khomeini, it was necessary to create “new judicial, financial, economic, cultural and political [Islamic] institutions”,⁴⁶ because “the ratio of Qur’anic verses concerned with the affairs of society to those concerned with ritual worship is greater than a hundred to one”.⁴⁷

This argument and position had major socio-political and doctrinal implications. Politically, it meant that Khomeini could make a clear distinction between the real *fuqaha* who were committed to their faith and those who were nothing but “people whom SAVAK [the Iranian secret police agency under the Shah] has issued a turban and told to pray”. Such false *akhunds* must have their turbans stripped from them. They must be “exposed and disgraced” as he put it, lest they destroy Islam from

within.⁴⁸ More importantly, from a doctrinal point of view, this position of Khomeini allowed him to challenge the Shi'i concept of *taqiya* (dissimulation), which allowed a Muslim to keep his or her true beliefs in concealment if their life was endangered. Khomeini decreed that when Islam and its welfare are endangered (as he perceived it to be) it was not permissible for the *fuqaha* to practice dissimulation or quietism, even if it were "licit" to do so and cost them their lives.⁴⁹ Given the lingering prominence of *taqiya* in Shi'ism, this was quite a profound development, as it went against the established Shi'i tradition of quietism.

Wilayat al Faqih – The Structure of a Religious Innovation

Wilayat al-Faqih constituted the parsimonious tenet that fused religion and politics in the institutionalized figure of the jurist. This re-politicization of Islam in general and Shi'ism in particular gave rise to an exceptional structural arrangement of religio-political patriarchy characterized by the sociocultural hegemony of a religiously charismatic class in conjunction with a broad popular base of consent.⁵⁰ The *faqih* represented the absolute moral and monistic standards of the faith; popular will was expressed through the choice of the president and other parliamentary legislative members (*majlis*). The former, short of any conditions compromising his entitlement, occupied the position permanently through a process of selection (by the Council of Experts); the latter ran for office for only two four-year terms in recurrent elections. The symbiotic relationship between both pillars of the system is on the basis of root and branch; the absolute and the relative; moral allegiance and political/administrative choice in a unified framework of the Islamic system. In this sense, popular will falls in the domain of the contingent rather than the sovereign or the necessary. In many ways, this order was similar to Ali Shari'ati's idea of a "regime of guidance", where the authority of the leader (in this case the *Wali al-Faqih*) rested on the people "recognizing" rather than necessarily electing him. The leader, whether innately charismatic or not, was responsible "not to the people, but to the 'principles of guidance' [Islam] according to which he had to move society toward its higher goals".⁵¹ This is an important point that distinguishes this political system in substantive and analytical terms, and should be taken into consideration so as not to confuse the electoral aspect within the system with democracy. To say that the Iranian system is Islamic means that Islamic values are primary and causal, and take precedence over values of popular sovereignty. At the same time, this does not mean that popular will is unimportant or that the absolute authority of the *faqih* translates into dictatorship. Rather, the institutional process becomes more a reflection of an "authority-bound" regime. As opposed to authoritarianism – in which civil society is dominated by the state and largely a pattern of vertical power relationships between the two⁵² – an authority-bound regime is a condition in which the character of the equilibrating relationship among the leadership, state and society is ordained according to an overarching common Islamic frame of reference. The institutional dynamics of this order has been reflected by Elaine Sciolino in the following words:

I have learned that it is impossible to talk about a monolithic Iranian "regime" any longer; the struggle for the country's future is so far too intense for that. Today there is no unified leadership or all-powerful governmental superstructure that makes and executes all decisions. Rather, power is dispersed among and even within many competing power centers, with varying agendas and methods of operation and degrees of authority. Even as I write, alliances are shifting. Players are adapting. Coalitions are building.⁵³

This reflection is supported by Eva Rakel, who also discerned formal and informal power structures comprised of state institutions as well as “networks” and “alliances” from within and outside those institutions. Such dynamics within the framework of Iran’s Islamic system hardly conform to the usual designations of totalitarianism, authoritarianism or democracy,⁵⁴ and are what render its religio-political system highly unique, as it cuts through all three.

Wilayat al Faqih: A Theocracy or Unique?

Questions nevertheless continue to be raised as to whether a religio-political system on the basis of Islam in general and *Wilayat al-Faqih* in particular is by necessity a theocratic regime. Addressing this issue remains significantly complex, as the very term “theocracy” remains contested and conceptually illusive. Frequently, proposed definitions tend to express constructed biases rather than accurate or actual depictions of the phenomenon observed. Donald Wittman, for instance, quite typically attempts to provide arguments against the viability of a theocratic system in favor of democracy, and clearly having Iran in mind, defines theocracy in terms that reveal his own preferences.⁵⁵ He defines theocracy as a “priestly class from a recognized religion” that “rules the country directly or indirectly through puppet political leaders”. According to this definition, Wittman considers Iran to be a theocracy, but not Saudi Arabia.⁵⁶ But by the same token, if one adopts the definition of theocracy provided by Douglas W. Allen as “a government grounded and constrained by a religious theology”,⁵⁷ then presumably Saudi Arabia qualifies as one. Another definition which also seems to have Islamic Iran in mind defines the term as a “political arrangement by which the main functions of secular government are discharged by a priesthood, who double as secular officials”.⁵⁸ Ronald Wintrobe and Fabio Padovano perceive theocracy as nothing more than a form of dictatorship,⁵⁹ whereas Brendon O’Leary designates it as simply a form of “aristocratic or oligarchic government”.⁶⁰ Definitional variations of this kind reveal that considerable uncertainty exists regarding conceptual distinctions between theocracy and an Islamic state, especially when the subtle differences between the two frequently render them synonymous. They also solely apply social theory’s discursive conceptions which tend to block “the Islamic” from speaking for and representing itself. Such a hegemonic condition is of consequence, as it lends itself to mutual suspicion, malignance and demonization. Ambiguities of this kind need to be addressed in this context on the level of three dimensions: the analytical, doctrinal and hegemonic subversive (“soft” power).

Analytically, the centrality of the populist element in the Iranian system mitigates against taking *Wilayat al-Faqih* a priori as an attempt at establishing a theocracy. Given the Islamic principle and doctrine of the Seal of the Prophets⁶¹ (i.e., that the Prophet Muhammad is the last of the Prophets of God), the very structure of the Islamic faith does not permit any person to make a credible claim to represent or speak for God, nor for any human mediation between man and God. And although in Islam many believe there is no separation between Mosque and state, fusion or subordination of political power to religious ordinances remains an interpretive effort on the basis of legitimate *ijtihad*, which by definition can make no claim of infallibility. As a matter of fact, the very principle of *ijtihad*, which structurally gravitates toward diverse opinions and schools of thought (*Mazaheb*), does not allow for religious centralization and subsequently theocratic/hierarchical patterns of authority. A *fatwa* or religious ruling on the basis of the *ijtihad* of a qualified *faqih* is religiously obligatory (*fard*) if there is unanimous consensus (*ijma’*) among all *fuqaha* – a rare occurrence – and religio-politically binding (*wajib*) if issued by a legitimate ruler: an Imam. Only in the former case is there a primary obligation directly derived from the *shariah*. In the latter, it becomes a secondary

ordinance, binding but not necessarily obligatory, on the basis of the legitimating credentials of the leadership and the circular covenant of allegiance. In this vein, it has more to do with the practical necessity of governance than with Islamic doctrinal imperatives. The issue of blasphemy, associated with direct denial of primary obligations, therefore does not arise.⁶²

The religious field in Iran, despite the fusion of political and religious powers, remains independent, polycentric and dynamic. *Al-wilayat* did not alter the basic structural relationships in the religious field. Clergymen “continue to disburse funds, aggregate followers on specific issues, articulate needs, wield the symbols of culture, administer shrines, manage and own lands”.⁶³ Organizationally and structurally this constrains the establishment of a centralized hierarchy intrinsic to the establishment of a theocracy. The fusion of religious and political powers does not necessarily alter this condition; it simply implies a choice of a political course of action from among varied legitimate religious opinions rather than the negation of *ijtihad*’s pluralism. Policy in this case becomes a religiously legitimated decision-making process. Moreover, the circular leadership-follower-relationship within which individuals have the freedom to choose their own *mujtahids* to emulate challenges the very essence of hierarchical order central to a theocratic regime. By stressing informal popular recognition of the *faqih*’s benevolence and wisdom, significant constraints on the risk of relapsing into a dominative pattern of power emanating from the fusion of religion and politics do exist. The Council of Experts which selects him for that role, taking popular recognition of the *faqih*’s preeminence in hindsight, further structures and formalizes this process.⁶⁴ Nor did the late Ayatollah Khomeini, despite his charisma, authority and control over the state’s coercive apparatus seriously attempt to bring the full force of the latter against the religious field’s polycentric and circular structure. In fact, the expanded terrain of religio-politics has brought in the historically overlooked popular dimension.

Unlike the broad vertical perceptions of authority associated with theocracy, an Islamic pattern of leadership, on the basis of the mutual obligations of the leaders and followers to each other, is circular. There remains, in other words, an inherent conflict between the authority patterns of theocratic hierarchy and *Wilayat al-Faqih*’s circularity. Furthermore, the polycentric character of the clerical organizational structure provides an opportunity for potential opposition to channel its energies and find expression through – and from within – the religious field itself, rather than from outside of it. Diverse popular demands, consequently, can find a differentiated religious/clerical response, which allows for the transmission of those demands to the interior of the religious field.

Conclusion

Islam re-politicized introduces a new dimension in world politics by reinstating Muslims as subjects rather than mere objects of Western cultural imperial hegemony. Imperialism, as Bordieu and Wacquant have observed, “rests on the power to universalize particularisms linked to a singular historical tradition by causing them to be misrecognized as such”⁶⁵ – this is when imperialism and totalitarianism converge. By articulating an activist agenda for the *ulema*, Khomeini and the Iranian Islamic experience continues to threaten the imperial order, rendering the misrecognized recognized.

It is important to note, as this chapter has attempted to point out, that this Iranian Islamic phenomenon is not just a socio-political occurrence, but more so an unfolding religious manifestation of an innate Islamic expectation. Separated from the Islamic, the social and the political can only offer a reductive rationalization of a much more comprehensive event that can be better understood from within the context of primary Islamic sources.

At the heart of this Islamic phenomenon is a creative theory of government and leadership which sought to tackle the recurring issue of legitimacy and question of who is entitled to lead the Muslim community (*umma*). But Ayatollah Khomeini's political theory is not simply a matter of theocratic principle sanctified by the totality of a divinely commissioned sacerdotal order. *Wilayat al-Faqih* and the structure of the Islamic government may harbor theocratic elements, but it is not accurate to designate the Iranian state a theocracy. It harbors democratic elements, but it may not be correct to designate it a democracy either; it may incorporate authoritarian or totalitarian elements, but this does not necessarily translate into totalitarianism. As an outcome of *ijtihad* it remains contingent on, and thus not necessary to, Islamic doctrinal belief. Although it does confirm the leadership of the *fuqaha* as an Islamic bloc or vanguard, this remains subject to the *fuqaha*'s ability to maintain their authority and legitimacy through their bloc capacities, as well as through their commitment to the faith, people and interests. Additionally, although it insightfully addresses the issues of who is to rule legitimately and how, this does not mean that all Muslims necessarily agree or accept the associated theory of *Wilayat al-Faqih*.

Nevertheless, a discourse of governance has no doubt developed both in theory and praxis which provides a platform from which to engage issues that have dogged Muslims for a long time. Such a development carries significant implications. As John Stempel put it, "Clerical supremacy as asserted by Ayatollah Khomeini is an implied standing challenge to secular governments every where. If it continues to exist and prosper, a centuries-old Western trend of separation between church and state would be reversed".⁶⁶ Stempel was attesting to the fact that Imam Khomeini, the man from Qum who would bring back the faith on the eve of the fifteenth Islamic century, "viewed from whatever perspective, was not an ordinary man".⁶⁷

¹ See Vali Nasr, *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts within Islam Will Shape the Future* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006), p. 225; and Hamid Enayat, "Iran: Khomeini's Concept of the 'Guardianship of the Jurisconsult'" in James Piscatori (ed.), *Islam in the Political Process* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 164–167.

² Shahrugh Akhavi, "The Ideology and Praxis of Shi'ism in the Iranian Revolution", *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 25 (2) (1983), p. 221.

³ Abdulaziz Sachedina, *The Just Ruler in Shi'ite Islam: The Comprehensive Authority of the Jurist in Imamite Jurisprudence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 5.

⁴ Heinz Halm, *Shi'a Islam: From Religion to Revolution* (trans. Allison Brown), (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers, 1997), p. 30.

[5](#) Ruhollah Khomeini, *Islam and Revolution I: Writings and Declarations of Imam Khomeini* (ed., trans. Hamid Algar), (London: KPI, 1985), p. 27.

[6](#) The concept of Wilayat al-Faqih was discussed extensively by Mulla Ahmad Naraqi (d. 1829), although in the restricted sense of performing certain functions related to legal judgments, *fatwas*, disposal of unclaimed property, and guardianship over orphans as well as other matters. However, he did not include governing as one of the concept's prerogatives. See Saiyad Niazmuddin Ahmad, *Fatwas of Condemnation: Islam and the Limits of Dissent* (Kuala Lumpur: International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization, 2006), pp. 270–271.

[7](#) Hamid Mavani, “Analysis of Khomeini’s Proofs for al-Wilaya al-Mutalqa (*sic*) (Comprehensive Authority) of the Jurist” in Linda Walbridge (ed.), *Most Learned of the Shia: The Institution of the Marja’ Taqlid* (Cary, NC: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 183.

[8](#) Said Amir Arjomand, *Turban for the Crown: The Islamic Revolution in Iran* (Cary, NC: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 178.

[9](#) *Ibid.*, p. 178; Mavani, “Analysis of Khomeini’s Proofs”, p. 184.

[10](#) Khomeini, *Islam and Revolution*, p. 62.

[11](#) Arjomand, *Turban for the Crown*, p. 178.

[12](#) Brendan O’Leary, “Theocracy and the Separation of Power” in Mario Ferraro and Ronald Wintrobe (eds.), *The Political Economy of Theocracy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 9.

[13](#) Shahrough Akhavi, *Religion and Politics in Contemporary Iran* (Albany: State University of New

York Press, 1980), p. 115; Khomeini, *Islam and Revolution*, p. 62.

[14](#) Said Amir Arjomand, *The Shadow of God and the Hidden Imam* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), p. xi.

[15](#) Wilfred Buchta, *Who Rules Iran? The Structure of Power in the Islamic Republic* (Washington, DC: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2000), p. 46.

[16](#) Halm, *Shi'a Islam*, p. 113; Nikki Keddie, *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), p. 19.

[17](#) Halm, *Shi'a Islam*, p. 112; Keddie, *Modern Iran*, p. 20; Hamid Dabashi, *Theology of Discontent* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2006), p. 580.

[18](#) Keddie, *Modern Iran*, p. 20; Hamid Algar, *Religion and State in Iran 1785–1906* (Berkeley: University of California Press 1969), p.10. It is worth noting that this principle had been relaxed when the Iranian government and religious authorities declared after Khomeini's passing that his death sentence against British author Salman Rushdie stood irreversible. According to this new position, "the traditional principle of 'the deceased have no authority (*la qawla li 'l-mayyit*), was no longer binding (see Halm, *Shi'a Islam*, p.153). This did not only apply to Khomeini. Even in his capacity as the *Vali* (guardian), religio-political faqih of Iran, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has permitted the followers of the late Grand Ayatollah Abul-Qassem al-Kho'i to continue to follow his rulings and emulate him despite his death and the fact that he did not accept Wilayat al-Faqih (see *Kayhan al-Arabi*, August 29, 1992, p. 1).

[19](#) Mohammad Saeed Bahmanpour, "On Religion, Politics and Democracy" in A. R. Koya (ed.), *Imam Khomeini: Life, Thought and Legacy* (Kuala Lumpur: Islamic Book Trust, 2009), p. 121.

[20](#) Said Amir Arjomand, *After Khomeini* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 4.

- [21](#) Juan Cole, *Sacred Space and Holy War* (New York: I.B. Taurus Publishers, 2002), pp. 70–74.
- [22](#) Keddie, *Modern Iran*, p. 20.
- [23](#) Arjomand, *The Shadow of God*, pp. 27–28.
- [24](#) Hamid Algar, in Khomeini, *Islam and Revolution*, p. 25.
- [25](#) Khomeini, *Islam and Revolution*, p. 27.
- [26](#) *Ibid.*, p. 40.
- [27](#) *Ibid.*, p. 40.
- [28](#) Muhsin Mahdi, *Ibn Khaldun's Philosophy of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), p. 263; Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah (An Introduction to History)* (Tr. Franz Rosenthal), (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1958), pp. 383–385.
- [29](#) Khomeini, *Islam and Revolution I*, p. 46.
- [30](#) *Ibid.*, 51.

[31 Ibid.](#), 55.

[32](#) Said Saffari, “The Legitimation of the Clergy’s Right to Rule in the Iranian Constitution of 1979”, *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 20 (1) (1993), p. 64.

[33](#) Quoted in Baqer Moin, *Khomeini: Life of the Ayatollah* (New York: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 1999), p. 308.

[34](#) Khomeini, *Islam and Revolution I*, p. 60.

[35 Ibid.](#), p. 60.

[36 Ibid.](#), p. 60.

[37](#) Enayat, “Iran: Khomeini’s Concept of the ‘Guardianship of the Jurisconsult’”, p. 165.

[38](#) Article 5 in the Iranian constitution stipulates the following: During the Occultation of the *Wali al-Asr* (may God hasten his reappearance), the *wilayah* and leadership of the *Umma* devolve on the just (*‘adl*) and pious (*muttaqi*) *faqih*, who is fully aware of the circumstances of his age; courageous, resourceful, and possessed of administrative ability, will assume the responsibilities of this office in accordance with Article 107. Article 109 also adds:

Following are the essential qualifications and conditions for the Leader: a) scholarship, as required for performing the functions of mufti in different fields of *fiqh*; b) Justice and piety, as required for the leadership of the Islamic *Ummah*; c) right political and social perspicacity, prudence, courage, administrative facilities and adequate capability for leadership. In case of multiplicity of persons fulfilling the above qualifications and conditions, the person possessing the better jurisprudential and

political perspicacity will be given preference.

[39](#) Moin, *Khomeini*, p. 200.

[40](#) See Mavani, “Analysis of Khomeini’s Proofs”.

[41](#) Khomeini, *Islam and Revolution I*, pp. 69–72.

[42](#) Two traditions by Imam Ja’far al-Sadiq (702–765) are reported as follows: “There shall come a time when the city of Qum and its people shall become a proof against the creation, and that shall be in the time of the occultation of the Mahdi, upon be peace, until his coming forth”. The second tradition states: “A man from Qum shall come forth and call the people to the truth. People shall gather around him like blocks of iron. Neither raging winds will shake them, nor shall battle tire them out, nor shall they display cowardice, and it is upon Allah that they shall place their trust” (quoted in Ahmad, *Fatwas of Condemnation*, p. 275). The second tradition has also been referred to by Enayat in “Iran: Khumayni’s Concept of the ‘Guardianship of the Jurisconsult’”, p. 168. Furthermore, a Prophetic tradition is reported as follows: When the Qur’anic verse “If ye turn back (from the path), He will substitute in your stead another people [non-Arab]; then they would not be like you” was revealed (47:39), the Prophet was asked who those substituting people might be. He put his hand on Salman al Farisi’s (the only Persian Muslim at the time) shoulder and said, “This man and his people. By him in whose hands my soul is, if the faith were to be as far as the Pleiades [secular epoch?] it shall be brought back by men from Persia [The Islamic Revolution?]”, Mohammad ibn Jariri al-Tabari, *Jami’ al-Bayan fi Tafsir al-Quran*, fourth edition, vol. xxvi (Beirut: Dar al-Ma’rifa, 1980), p. 42. See also Muhammad Ahmad al-Qurtobi, *Al-Jami’ li-Ahkam al-Quran*, vol. xvi (Beirut: Dar Ihya’ al-Turath al-Arabi, 1967), p. 258.

[43](#) Khomeini, *Islam and Revolution I*, p. 126.

[44](#) *Ibid.*, pp. 127, 132.

[45](#) [Ibid.](#), pp. 30, 132, 144.

[46](#) Khomeini (1985: 146); [Ibid.](#), pp. 69–72.

[47](#) [Ibid.](#), p. 29.

[48](#) [Ibid.](#), p. 145.

[49](#) [Ibid.](#), p. 144.

[50](#) Mangol Bayat, “The Iranian Revolution of 1978–79: Fundamentalist or Modern?” *Middle East Journal*, 37 (1) (1983), p. 41.

[51](#) Farzin Vahdat, *God and Juggernaut* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2002), p. 152.

[52](#) Juan Linz, “An Authoritarian Regime: Spain” in Erik Allardt and Stein Rokkan (eds.) *Mass Politics* (New York: The Free Press, 1970), pp. 251–283.

[53](#) Elaine Sciolino, *Persian Mirrors: The Elusive Face of Iran* (London: The Free Press, 2000), p. 360.

[54](#) Eva P. Rakel, *Power, Islam and Political Elite in Iran* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), pp. xxii, 5.

[55](#) Donald Wittman, “Theocracy and the Evolution of Morals” in Mario Ferraro and Ronald Wintrobe (eds.), *The Political Economy of Theocracy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 173–174.

[56](#) *Ibid.*, p. 172.

[57](#) D. W. Allen, “Theocracy as a Screening Device” in Ferraro and Wintrobe (eds.), *The Political Economy of Theocracy*, p. 181.

[58](#) M. Ferraro, “The Economics of Theocracy” in Ferraro and Wintrobe (eds.), *The Political Economy of Theocracy*, p. 31.

[59](#) R. Wintrobe and F. Padovano, “Theocracy, Natural Spiritual Monopoly and Dictatorship” in Ferraro and Wintrobe (eds.), *The Political Economy of Theocracy*.

[60](#) Brendan O’Leary, “Theocracy and the Separation of Power” in Ferraro & Wintrobe (eds.), *The Political Economy of Theocracy*, p. 26.

[61](#) Qur’an 33:4.

[62](#) This analysis borrows from Amr Sabet, *Islam and the Political: Theory, Governance and International Relations* (London: Pluto Press, 2008). The intimidation of some of the Grand Ayatollahs that did not agree with Ayatollah Khomeini’s *ijtihad* into silence during the early years of the revolution had more to do with the secondary rather than primary ordinances of Islam and the situational imperatives of the time. Several of the *mujtahids* who did not agree with Wilayat al-Faqih succumbed to its authority on political rather than religious grounds. Their rejection of this *ijtihad* in many respects carries the same religiously authoritative weight as that of Ayatollah Khomeini. It was religious politics, however, that made the difference. In rejecting the principle according to this logic, the other *mujtahids* lacked appropriate discernment despite their religious expertise. Islam was so

threatened that quietism could no longer be afforded, and activism was necessary. This was consistent with what Khomeini had stated earlier in his Najaf lectures – that mere spiritual superiority (see Khomeini *Islam and Revolution*, p. 62) was not enough to “confer increased governmental power”, but that religio-political competence was also needed.

[63](#) Akhavi, *Religion and Politics*, p. 179.

[64](#) The Council of Experts which comprises of 86 expert Islamic scholars, voted for from a list of candidates, is a powerful organ which in addition to selecting the *Faqih* also oversees his performance. Members of the Council are elected for a period of eight years and have the power to dismiss the *Faqih* should he fail in performing his duties, or become incapacitated for one reason or the other.

[65](#) Pierre Bourdieu and Loic Wacquant, “On the Cunning of Imperialist Reason”, *Theory, Culture and Society*, 16 (1) (1999), p. 41.

[66](#) John Stempel, *Inside the Iranian Revolution* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981), p. 311.

[67](#) Moin, *Khomeini*, p. 313.

4 Ayatollah Khomeini's Rule of the Guardian Jurist

From Theory to Practice

Ali Rahnema

After Ayatollah Khomeini's arrest in June 1963, his supporters staged the 15 Khordad uprising; the gravest political challenge to the Shah's rule since Mosaddeq's premiership of 1951–1953. Khomeini's banishment from Iran in November 1964, however, provoked no serious political or social reaction. Khomeini's loyal students in Qom issued declarations and tried in vain to convince the sources of emulation such as Ayatollah Kazem Shari'atmadari to cancel their regular classes at the seminary schools in protest against Khomeini's exile.¹ The *bazaar* in Tehran, a traditional bastion of Khomeini's supporters, was agitated for a few days.² But the religious sources of emulation were not willing to take the risk of antagonizing the regime of the Shah and jeopardizing the safety and welfare of the Qom seminary schools by calling on believers to openly oppose the regime. Subsequently, there were no signs of mass demonstrations typical of June 1963, and life resumed in Qom and elsewhere as if Khomeini and his cause had been forgotten. On January 21, 1965, Mohammad Bokhara'i, a member of the armed branch of the Coalition of Islamic Mourning Groups, shot and killed Prime Minister Hasan Ali Mansur in front of the parliament (*majlis*). This assassination and the subsequent trial of the members of the armed branch proved that Khomeini's influence in society was deeper than it seemed.

During his almost fifteen years in exile, Khomeini had plenty of time to study and reflect. The events that took place between 1962 and 1964, and in particular the achievements and failures of the 15 Khordad uprising, must have greatly marked and preoccupied him. Khomeini's ideas regarding the role of Islamic jurists in a country with burning political issues were reflected in a book in Farsi, transcribed from his lectures and printed under the various titles of *Islamic Government (Hokumat Eslami)*, *A Letter from Imam Musavi Kashef al-Qeta (Namehe'i az Emam Musavi Kashef al-Qeta)* as well as *The Rule of the Guardian Jurist (Velayat-e Faqih)*. It could be argued that the politics of the 15 Khordad uprising cast a long shadow over Khomeini's book (hereafter referred to as *Islamic Government*). In Najaf, Khomeini would repeatedly maintain: "In the same manner that we mourn and beat our chests in the memory of Imam Hosein and Ashura, every year we should also mourn and beat our chests in remembrance of the 15th of Khordad".³ It would be fair to say that the ideas developed in *Islamic Government* were crystallized in the praxis of Khomeini's political opposition to the Shah during 1962–1964.

Soon after his arrival in Najaf in October 1965, Khomeini's old students in Qom that were now studying in Najaf insisted that he continue his lectures from where he had left off in Iran. Khomeini was asked to start his classes from the middle of the subject of transaction (*bey'*) and specifically from the topic of donations (*mo'atat*).⁴ He began on November 14, 1965, at the Shaykh Ansari mosque, also known as the Turk's mosque.⁵ In the winter of 1970 while lecturing on the broad topic of Islamic commercial law or *mo'amelat* (a key component of Islamic jurisprudence), he came back to the subject of transactions (*bey'*).⁶

It was while discussing transactions from a legal perspective that, as might be expected, Khomeini

broached the topic of the role and responsibility of the Islamic jurist as guardian or custodian of minors and the mentally deranged, in cases where the latter were involved in a transaction. It was at this point that Khomeini intentionally strayed from the normal legal trajectory of his subject matter to advance a political theory. He began his lecture by warning his students about his digression. He said, “The subject of the Rule of the Guardian Jurist *provides an opportunity* to speak about some of the issues and problems related to it”.⁷

Khomeini allotted thirteen lectures to the topic of the Rule of the Guardian Jurist, the lynchpin of his theory of Islamic Government. These lectures were delivered between January 21, 1970, and February 9, 1970, some four years after his arrival in Najaf.⁸ Transcribed versions of independent lectures and selections of them were subsequently reproduced and distributed, and Khomeini edited the transcription of the complete series before it was published in Beirut by his friends and followers. The finished book was published in the autumn of 1970, and was clandestinely dispatched to Iran.⁹

On February 27, 1970, almost twenty days after Khomeini’s last lecture on the Rule of the Guardian Jurist, and about six months before the Beirut publication of the book, a SAVAK source reported that according to Morteza Mutahhari, Khomeini had written a pamphlet on guardianship and the monarchy and had given copies to Iranians who had met with him in Iraq on their way to pilgrimage.¹⁰ It thus seems as if well before the official publication of Khomeini’s book in Beirut, copies of its content were circulating in Iran. According to one report, Khomeini’s lectures in Najaf were being recorded and listened to by his followers in Qom’s seminary schools, who subsequently transcribed and distributed them as they were brought to Iran from Najaf.¹¹

Islamic Government on the Basis of the Rule of the Guardian Jurist

The content of *Islamic Government* is primarily political. In it, Khomeini explains why the Shah’s regime needed to be overthrown, and the strategic and tactical measures that needed to be taken in order to guarantee its downfall. The religious argumentation and references evoked by Khomeini served to justify and legitimize his sequential political theory of revolution, followed by the establishment of an Islamic government under the leadership of the Guardian Jurist. But there is nothing fresh or novel about the main ideas put forward in *Islamic Government*. They had already been conceptualized and articulated during the course of his speeches and pronouncements made in Iran between 1962 and 1964. What the book presented was an Islamic alternative to revolution and government that drew from the traditions and culture of Shi’i Islam and its religious sources.

The popularity of the book at the time among the younger teachers and students at seminary schools was probably because of the fact that an Islamic theory of revolution was finally emerging from the cautious and conservative Shi’i centres of learning, developed by an *’alim* that was also a source of emulation (*marja-e taqlid*) to many. Khomeini’s account of the Shah’s oppressive (*ja’er*) regime as well as his reasoning as to why it should be overthrown, and the key role he envisaged for the clergy as the vanguard of this Islamic anti-Shah revolution were as important – if not more so – than his theory of the Rule of the Guardian Jurist. It appears as if Khomeini needed to articulate a theory of state in order to demonstrate that in the aftermath of the Shah’s overthrow, Muslims would possess a clear and coherent theory of government deduced from the *Shari’at* bases. Khomeini was, however, fully aware that his rendition of the theory of the Rule of the Guardian Jurist (*velayat-e faqih*) as a possible basis for Islamic governance was far from mainstream among the majority of Islamic jurists, let alone the sources of emulation. He recognizes this in the beginning of his book by mentioning in passing that “today, not much attention is paid to the Rule of the Guardian Jurist

because of the social condition of Muslims and especially the circumstances prevailing in the seminary schools”.¹² In *Islamic Government*, Khomeini presents two ideas and subsequent policy positions, which coming from a source of imitation were unprecedented. His work also revolutionized the mindset and self-conceived socio-political identity and role of the junior clergy, young *tulab* (seminary school students) and pious. This is not to say that his ideas were totally unheard of, but that the provision of a systematic and formal religious justification for revolution and rule by an Islamic jurist was new at the time.

The Necessity of Revolution

Khomeini uses evidence primarily from the reports or sayings attributed to the Prophet and Shi'i Imams (*akhbar va revayat*), and secondarily from the Qur'an to support the thrust of his political theory that revolution against an oppressive and un-Islamic ruler was incumbent on Muslims. *Islamic Government* is primarily a call on Iranian Muslims to complete what was started by Khomeini in 1962 and aborted in 1964. Khomeini argues that the *ulema* and clergy have a duty to awaken the people and lead the revolt. To buttress his claim for the necessity of a revolution, Khomeini provides religious-political and economic reasons. The *Shariah* (Islamic law), he claimed, dictated that anti-Islamic or un-Islamic regimes should be changed, as they prevent the application of Islamic law. Such regimes were labelled by Khomeini as polytheistic, and their leaders as unjust usurpers (*taghut*).¹³ To prepare the right conditions for the advancement and blossoming of pious believers, Khomeini argued that polytheism and *taghut* must be eradicated in order to prevent the spreading of “corruption on earth”. According to Khomeini, all unjust regimes that revolted against “divine regimes” were to be considered as *taghut*.¹⁴ God, he claims, has ruled that people should revolt against unjust regimes (*taghut*).¹⁵ Thus, Khomeini concludes that “we have no other choice but to rise against and destroy the treacherous corrupt and unjust regimes which are also corruptors of the people”.¹⁶

According to Khomeini, the task of freeing the Islamic nation from colonialism and the influence of puppet regimes compelled people to revolt against oppressive regimes and establish a new government.¹⁷ Under the rubric of the necessity to save the oppressed and destitute, Khomeini argues that the colonialists, through their puppet regimes, have imposed unjust economic systems on the people, polarizing them into the oppressors (*zalem*) and the oppressed (*mazlum*).¹⁸ He thus calls for the overthrow of all oppressive regimes in which the rich and politically powerful, who he also considers to be lecherous, licentious and corrupt, live off forbidden (*haram*) economic activities.¹⁹ For Khomeini, what was started in 1962 was to be a battle cry throughout the Muslim world. To add real authority to his arguments for revolution as a religious duty, Khomeini posits that the Qur'an emphasizes the obligation to revolt against kings.²⁰

The Necessity of an Islamic Government

What is the social and political role of the clergy during the occultation of the Hidden Imam? Khomeini responds that after the Prophet passes away, the application of Islamic laws continues to be necessary and obligatory.²¹ On the basis of selected reports (*akhbar*) attributed to Shi'i Imams, Khomeini argues that without a guardian to watch over and direct the people, an honest leader who would teach them Islamic injunctions and beliefs and enforce the laws, the pursuit of private interests would lead to personal and social corruption, chaos and destruction.²² Therefore, in order to avoid

chaos in the absence of a person appointed by the Imams, inaction is forbidden and Islamic political guidance necessary.²³ This necessity for a religious custodian of the people is primarily on the basis of his clearly posited belief that “the people are [mentally] deficient and in need of completion or perfection”.²⁴ People in general are considered by Khomeini to need guidance in the same way that a minor needs to follow the instructions of the legal authority that has custody over him or her. Khomeini thus argues that leadership and rule belong to the *fuqaha* or legal experts of Islamic law, who are considered just (*’adl*).²⁵

If a deserving and just expert on Islamic law rises and establishes his rule, he will possess the same right to rule as that which the Prophet and Imams possessed, and it would be incumbent on the people to obey him.²⁶ The relation between the ruling Guardian Jurist (*faqih*) and the people is deemed similar to the custodianship of a person legally assigned to supervise the affairs of a minor (*saqir*). In both cases, the custodian has a similar responsibility; one social and the other individual.²⁷ Consequently, the decisions and ordinances of the ruling jurist are incumbent on all.²⁸ According to Khomeini, the responsibilities and purview of the Guardian Jurist in matters of state encompass all those state domains which belonged to the Prophet.²⁹ The ruling Guardian Jurist is, therefore, responsible for the executive, legislative, judiciary and armed forces.³⁰

In 1970, Khomeini was of the opinion that man-made laws are by themselves insufficient to guarantee the felicity and welfare of the nation.³¹ Khomeini believed that Islamic criminal laws, including *hudud* and *qisas*, should be applied and Islamic taxes such as *khums*, *zakat*, *jaziyeh* and *kharaj* should be collected.³² Khomeini insists several times in his book on the collection of Islamic taxes, arguing that these injunctions are not bound by one specific time or context, and therefore must be applied by an Islamic government throughout history.³³ To draw a parallel between the authority of a twentieth-century ruling Guardian Jurist and the Prophet and Imams, Khomeini emphasizes that all the Islamic laws applied during their time are equally applicable today.³⁴ Khomeini’s emphasis on the necessity of Islamic taxes at all times is noteworthy in view of his later abandonment of such taxes, and his utilization of modern direct taxes on income, inheritance and capital gains following the establishment of the Islamic Republic.

Khomeini’s ideal concept of an Islamic government in Najaf can also be considered free of any ideas borrowed from Western political theory. For Khomeini, the Shari’at remained the only law of the land, and the ruling Guardian Jurist was sole administrator of this law. He was intent on presenting his political construct in contrast to and distinct from all modern theories or forms of government, arguing that borrowing from Western constitutions has been the source of Iran’s problems. Although the broad contours of the Islamic government are argued, the detailed presentation of how the Islamic government would function on a day-to-day basis in administering the state was nevertheless left ambiguous. Although Khomeini is categorical that his model of government is different from a constitutional monarchy or republic because human beings were from promulgating new laws, he does not go into specific details. Indeed, the closest he comes to explaining specifics is to suggest that an Islamic government would possess a “planning parliament” instead of a legislative parliament, which would set policies for various ministries on the basis of Islamic edicts.³⁵ Khomeini does not allude to who would be eligible for such a parliament, whether they would be elected or appointed or what their relation would be to the ruling Guardian Jurist.

Khomeini’s 1970 Najaf position on Islamic government is primarily intended to convince his audience, which presumably accepts the mission of the faith to be primarily spiritual and personal, that political Islam is not an aberration or deviation from the custom and tradition of the Shi’i Imams,

and that Islam does possess a theory of government which it is incumbent on all believers to follow. To persuade pious Iranians and most importantly the *ulema* and teachers of the seminary schools that the revolution would not be in vain, Khomeini needed to demonstrate that the revolution would yield a new Islamic political system, for which he had already outlined the contours. As would be revealed later on, Khomeini's Najaf conception of governance is different from the detailed practical Islamic constitution that he would approve in the form of the final draft of the constitution.

Expediency or Dogmatism?

The Shah left Iran on January 16, 1979, and Khomeini returned on February 1, 1979. On February 4, he appointed Mehdi Bazargan as his prime minister while Shahpour Bakhtiar, the Shah's prime minister, was still in power. On February 11, the Iranian revolution, under the leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini, succeeded in taking the reins of power. After two successive days of voting on March 30 and 31, 1979, an overwhelming majority of Iranians who had participated in the referendum on the form of their future political system voted in favour of an Islamic republic; Iran became an Islamic republic and not an Islamic government.

Prior to the referendum, Khomeini repeatedly reiterated that he was in favour of an Islamic republic: nothing more, nothing less. In the excitement of the moment, the fact that Khomeini had written in Najaf that his ideal Islamic government was free of any Western political residues – and certainly different from a republic – went unnoticed. Practicalities had clearly begun to alter the theoretical purities of the Najaf discourse, with considerable consequences. A republic of whatever sort implied empowering the opinion and will of the people, which in turn undermined the Najaf discourse.

The constitution of the Islamic Republic was to define the details of the new political system and balance of power between the various social actors. The national referendum on the constitution, which ended on December 3, 1979, approved an unstable dual political system; part hierocratic and part democratic. Four key articles were included to guarantee Khomeini's concept of the Rule of the Guardian Jurist. But neither provided full political powers to the Guardian Jurist, nor denied the promulgation of man-made laws. First, Article 5 of the constitution stipulated that as long as the Twelfth Imam remained in occultation, a qualified Islamic jurist (*faqih*) had the right to rule and exercise leadership. Second, Article 110 defined the wide-ranging rights and prerogatives of the Guardian Jurist, whose responsibilities varied from supreme commander of the armed forces to head of the radio and television network to appointing the supreme judicial authority of the country. Third, Article 91 stipulated that the Guardian Council would be responsible for assuring the compatibility of all legislation with Islamic ordinances. The voting members of the Guardian Council were to be Islamic jurists appointed by the Guardian Jurist. Fourth, Articles 157 and 162 stipulated that the judicial system of the land was to be under the control of Islamic jurists. Reflecting the republican characteristics of the political system, articles 6, 7, 8, 19–42, 57 and 71–90 safeguarded the sovereignty of the people. Article 6, for example, stipulated that “the affairs of the country must be administered on the basis of public opinion expressed by the means of election ... or by means of referenda”.

The inclusion of the Rule of the Guardian Jurist in the Iranian constitution of December 1979 may be attributed to Khomeini's perseverance in insisting the matter. This line of argument could also presume that Khomeini was an unswerving dogmatic politician who sought to and succeeded in imposing his will on Iranian society by skilfully manoeuvring his agenda to a successful conclusion.

In this scenario, Khomeini appears as a master manipulator that skilfully replaced a monarchy with a hierarchy, who hijacked the democratic aspirations of Iranians and usurped their right to a representative form of government.

A chronological study of the course of events from January to December 1979 will lead to a different conclusion from a common one, which holds Khomeini responsible for the inclusion of the Rule of the Guardian Jurist in the Iranian constitution. It will also reveal that far from being an uncompromising religious zealot fixed on fundamentals, Khomeini was a highly pragmatic politician for whom the establishment, legitimization and consolidation of the Islamic Republic was far more important than his Najaf revolutionary manifesto. At that time, Khomeini believed that the Rule of the Guardian Jurist could serve both to mobilize Iranians to revolt against the regime and as an Islamic alternative to the monarchical system. Some ten years later, the primary objectives of Khomeini's Najaf manifesto were achieved when Iranians overthrew the monarchy. It was now important to put a constitution in place.

The constitution of the Janus-faced Islamic Republic could have steered the state towards either Islamic or republican values. However, evidence indicates that in the immediate aftermath of the revolution, Khomeini was more interested in the rapid installation and legalization of a political structure, as opposed to deciding on whether it would be more Islamic or republican in nature. He wished to have a popularly endorsed constitution put in place that would legally demonstrate that he had successfully replaced the monarchy with a new Islamic order. As long as the constitution could be vaguely defined as Islamic it would have won Khomeini's approval; the specifics were not of paramount interest to Khomeini. Even if Khomeini regarded the Rule of the Guardian Jurist as a desirable article of the constitution, until May 22, 1979, he was willing to sacrifice it along with any determining role for the *fuqaha* (Islamic Jurists) in the executive, legislative and even judicial administration of the state. It will be evinced that Khomeini would have willingly accepted a minimalist Islamic constitution, such as the final draft of the Islamic Republic's constitution (sometimes referred to as the preliminary draft or *pishnevis qanun assasi*) if his political entourage had agreed to a rapid ratification of the constitution. Ironically, it was the inflexible ethical politics of lay politicians which prevented the ratification of a more republican and less Islamic constitution, and in turn ushered in one on the basis of the Rule of the Guardian Jurist and other Islamic notions.

Drafting the Constitution of the Islamic Republic

Step One: The Paris/Habibi Draft

On October 7, 1978, Ayatollah Khomeini landed in Paris from Baghdad, and was greeted by an enthusiastic group of religious Iranian political activists and intellectuals. Hasan Habibi, who was among those that greeted Khomeini, recalls that once Khomeini settled in France he was given the responsibility of drafting a new constitution for the post-Pahlavi.³⁶ Habibi had a background in Islamic constitutional law and had already written a pamphlet entitled "*Emamat* (Imamat) in Shi'i Law".³⁷ The Paris draft of the constitution would discard the old constitutional framework that had been constructed on the principle of monarchy. Habibi incorporated a constellation of ideas contained within *Emamat*, Khomeini's Islamic pronouncements and the opinions of Islamic jurists into the new document. He also sought Khomeini's guidance and included his opinions whenever he had doubts on legal matters.³⁸

In the Paris draft of the constitution, Habibi accommodated the general implications of the Rule of

the Guardian Jurist by empowering the Islamic jurists in the Guardian Council with custodianship and authority over the Islamicity of the laws ratified by parliament. In doing so, Habibi incorporated Khomeini's Najaf prescriptions that Islamic ordinances should prevail as the law of the land, and that Islamic jurists should act as its interpreters. The idea of a clerical Guardian Council, however, already existed in the previous monarchical constitution. Habibi's draft was completed and presented to Khomeini on January 22, 1979; twenty days before Khomeini's triumphant return to Tehran.³⁹ In Paris, Khomeini did not disapprove of or allocate any privileged position to the clergy other than their role as members of the Guardian Council.⁴⁰ Khomeini was anxious to dispatch the Paris draft of the constitution to Tehran as quickly as possible to obtain the views and opinions of the sources of emulation (*marja-e taqlid*) in Iran. The Paris draft reached Tehran before Khomeini's arrival.

Step Two: Habibi and Lay Jurists

Beginning in the summer of 1978, a group of lay jurists – most who were close to Mehdi Bazargan's Iran Freedom Movement – became convinced that once the Iranian revolution succeeded, a type of republic would replace the monarchy. To prepare for that eventuality, they started thinking about a new and appropriate constitution.⁴¹ Their first meeting was held at Ahmad Sadr Haj Seyyed Javadi's house and was attended by Abdolkarim Lahiji, Naser Minachi and Fatollah Banisadr. This group, whose numbers varied, continued to meet regularly at Hosseyniyyeh Ershad, where Naser Minachi would take detailed notes on their deliberations;⁴² in the process they became known as the "Ershad circle".

Once Habibi returned to Tehran, the work of the Ershad circle on the constitutional draft was put at his disposal on Khomeini's behest. To merge his own work with theirs, Habibi constituted a new committee composed of two members of the Ershad circle – Abdolkarim Lahiji and Fatollah Banisadr – in addition to Naser Katuzian, Ja'far Langerudi and himself.⁴³ Naser Minachi joined this new group, and again hosted their secret meetings at Hoseyniyyeh Ershad. The first joint meeting of the Habibi-Ershad circle took place on February 8, 1979. The group benefited from the studies that had been done on the Algerian, French and Soviet constitutions, in addition to an analysis of the Human Rights Charter. The group met regularly in the mornings and afternoons, and finalized the official first draft of the constitution by February 26, 1979.⁴⁴ The draft was subsequently handed to Khomeini, who thanked the committee members for their work, prayed for them and at that time suggested that the draft should be put to a national referendum. He then told the group that he was tired and planned to go to Qom to teach, still insisting that the country needed a constitution.⁴⁵ On February 29, in accordance with Khomeini's instructions, the draft was sent to the religious scholars of Qom.

Step Three: Provisional Government and the Revolutionary Council

On March 15, 1979, the draft and suggestions from high-ranking Islamic jurists in Qom was returned to Khomeini, which he then forwarded to the provisional government for a final review.⁴⁶ A committee under the supervision of Yadollah Sahabi reviewed the constitution, ratified it and sent it as a bill to the Revolutionary Council, which acted as the legislative body at the time.

In the Revolutionary Council, two important alterations were made. Under the auspices of Ayatollah Mohammad Beheshti, the composition of the Guardian Council was changed from six Islamic jurists and six legal experts to five Islamic jurists and six legal experts.⁴⁷ Because the

decisions of the Guardian Council on the compatibility of laws passed in the parliament with Islamic ordinances depended on a majority vote, including the approving vote of at least one Islamic jurist, this alteration weakened the weight of the Islamic jurists.⁴⁸ Furthermore, the Guardian Council was not entitled to review every law ratified by the parliament for its compliance with Islam, but only those laws referring to specific authorities such as the sources of emulation, the president or the prosecutor general, which required a more close and critical examination.⁴⁹ Beheshti also altered certain articles of the draft concerning economic and financial affairs, stipulating that the basis of property ownership in the Islamic Republic would only be labour, and not include inheritance and commerce. According to Ezatollah Sahabi, Ayatollah Beheshti veered the constitution towards the inclusion of a leftist economy.⁵⁰

Just as in the case of the Paris and Habibi-Ershad drafts, this third draft had been thoroughly reviewed by the Revolutionary Council and included key clerical figures such as Mutahhari, Taleqani, Beheshti, Mahdavi-Kani, Rafsanjani, Musaviye-Ardebili, Bahonar and Khamenei. It was free of any references to the Rule of the Guardian Jurist, or any clause other than the stipulation for the Guardian Council which could weaken the independent will and popular vote of the people, expressed through democratic channels, as the basis of the constitution. When the issue of whether women could stand for presidency or become judges came up in the Revolutionary Council, Beheshti argued that “we have documents proving that women could become judges”.⁵¹ Therefore, in the third draft, neither the position of the president nor that of the prime minister were gender or sect (Shi’i or Sunni) constrained.⁵²

The finalized draft was sent to Khomeini as well as to the Grand Ayatollahs in Qom, namely Mar’ashiye-Najafi, Shariatmadari and Golpayegani. The three Ayatollahs responded quickly. At the time, none of them indicated a desire for the inclusion of the Rule of the Guardian Jurist. A few days after receiving the final draft, Khomeini summoned representatives from the Revolutionary Council, and Beheshti and Bani-Sadr went to Qom. Khomeini had six objections to the finalized draft, three of which were immediately resolved. None of his objections were related to the absence of the Rule of the Guardian Jurist or the power which was given to the people’s voice and vote as the basis of the new Islamic Republic, or the absence of the role of Islamic jurists as the guardians of the people. Rather, Khomeini was of the opinion that the president should be male and Shi’i. This was also the perspective of Ayatollah Golpayegani. According to Bazargan, Khomeini insisted that judges, too, had to be male.⁵³ He also believed that the stipulation in the draft which maintained that in the Sunni regions of the country the Islamic *fiqh* or jurisprudence would prevail was vague. Khomeini also wished to see the emblem on the national flag change from the sun and lion to something else.⁵⁴ According to Ebrahim Yazdi, the three issues on which Khomeini had insisted were incorporated into the final draft of the constitution.⁵⁵

Legitimizing the Final draft of the Constitution: Pragmatic Realism Meets Ethical Righteousness

The question of how to present the third draft of the constitution to the people for their final judgement became a Gordian knot, the untying of which would undo the generally democratic constitution approved by Khomeini, the provisional government and the Revolutionary Council. After Khomeini’s meeting with Beheshti and Bani-Sadr and having made his comments on the draft of the constitution, Bazargan and some members of his cabinet, including Yadollah Sahabi, Sadr Haj Seyyed

Javadi and Sabaghiyan, paid a visit to Khomeini in Qom sometime in mid-May 1979. They discussed the final draft of the constitution, and Khomeini insisted that once his recommendations were incorporated – which they subsequently were – the document as it stood should be put to a referendum.⁵⁶

On another occasion after April 28, 1979, when a text of the draft was published in the daily *Keyhan*, Bani Sadr and Musaviye Ardebili visited Khomeini in Qom and reported on the people's generally positive reaction to the draft. During this meeting, Khomeini insisted that because the draft had met the approval of the people, the Constituent Assembly was no longer necessary and should be officially put to referendum.⁵⁷ Khomeini worried that delaying the process of voting on a constitution and legitimizing the foundations of the new Islamic Republic was politically dangerous, as it would leave the new revolution in a precarious limbo. He believed that the vacuum generated by the absence of proper state structures and organs provided an opportunity for the royalists, counter-revolutionaries and foreign powers that supported them to intervene in the affairs of the country.⁵⁸ In his mind, the rapid ratification of the constitution legalized and subsequently shielded the revolution both internally and externally.

The question of how to put the final draft of the constitution to the people's vote became a hot topic of discussion within the Revolutionary Council. Two views clashed on the modality of ratifying the constitution. The first view belonged to Bazargan, Yadollah Sahabi, Bani Sadr, Yazdi and Sabaghiyan and Ayatollahs Taleqani and Musaviye Ardebili.⁵⁹ This group believed that the final draft needed to go to a Constituent Assembly composed of elected representatives of the people. Only once the Constituent Assembly had reviewed and debated the articles of the draft would the final document be put to the people's vote. Their arguments hinged on deep-seated ethical and political concerns as well as an underlying respect for the will of the people, and the necessity of securing their participation and input at every step of the political process. They thus argued passionately against the expedient solution of putting the existing final draft which Khomeini had approved and signed to a popular referendum, as it would not include the opinions of the people or their representatives in the process.⁶⁰

The second view was represented by Ayatollahs Beheshti, Rafsanjani, Mahdavi Kani, Khamenei and Bahonar as well as Yadollah's sons Ezatollah Sahabi, Qotbzadeh and Katira'i.⁶¹ This predominantly clerical group represented a more politically pragmatic and realistic view of the conditions and problems facing the country. This group argued that first convening a Constituent Assembly of some 350–500 elected representatives and then having the representatives, with very different political opinions, debate the 180 articles of the draft item by item would take years. They believed that during this period of political transition and turmoil, uncertainties had to be minimized. Putting the draft constitution to a referendum, which had already been approved by all revolutionary institutions as well as the highest religious authorities including Khomeini, would enable the revolutionary state to legitimize and consolidate itself quickly by preparing for presidential and parliamentary elections.⁶²

Yadollah Sahabi refers to an interesting argument put forth by Hashemi Rafsanjani, who was in favour of bypassing the Constituent Assembly and putting the document to a direct popular vote. According to his account, Rafsanjani was concerned with the outcome of the deliberations of a Constituent Assembly. In the heat of debate between the two sides, his father, Yadollah, became very emotional and, with tears in his eyes, insisted on the necessity of the two-step process whereby the draft would first go to the Constituent Assembly and then subsequently be put to a vote. At this time, Rafsanjani addressed Yadollah Sahabi and Bazargan and suggested that in view of prevailing conditions, they should not be insistent on a Constituent Assembly. Rafsanjani argued that if a

Constituent Assembly were to be convened, at least 70–80 per cent of its members would be made up of clerics. In that case, he deduced, they would ratify a constitution that would make you “bite your finger of regret” (*shoma angosht hasrat be dandan khahid gazed*). With his realistic perception of the balance of power in society, Rafsanjani was warning his legalistic and ethical colleagues that realities were such that a Constituent Assembly would produce a document that would make them wish they had never argued for one.⁶³ According to Bani Sadr, Rafsanjani cautioned the members of the Revolutionary Council that the composition of the Constituent Assembly would be a reactionary and hidebound one that would not approve the contents of the final draft of the constitution.⁶⁴

As neither side in the Revolutionary Council was capable of convincing the other and time was running out, they opted to take the dilemma to Khomeini in Qom for resolution; on May 22, 1979, the members of the provisional government and the Revolutionary Council met with Khomeini.⁶⁵ Different reports of this very crucial meeting, which in some ways decided the fate of the country for many years to come, all concur on the main topics and issues discussed and what was said by whom. At the beginning of the discussions, Khomeini, who seemed worried and annoyed, addressed his visitors disapprovingly, exclaiming that the country was in danger, and questioning them as to why they were delaying the course of events. Khomeini said, “Give me this (draft of the constitution) and I will put it to a referendum”.⁶⁶ The group in favour of a direct referendum supported Khomeini’s position by presenting their arguments again; the opponents presented their case.

Bazargan’s main argument at this meeting was that a promise had been made to the people which needed to be honored. He argued that ever since Paris, and again after his arrival in Iran, Khomeini had promised a Constituent Assembly, and that one of the tasks of his government as stipulated by Khomeini had been to organize one. The Constituent Assembly, he argued, would guarantee the democratic and popular-based nature of the Islamic Republic. Bazargan and Bani Sadr voiced their concern that people might feel as if Khomeini was engaging in double-talk if he were to go back on his promise of a Constituent Assembly. Bazargan’s legalistic, principled, democratic, ethical and pedantic position was countered by Khomeini’s sense of political pragmatism, urgency and realism. Brushing aside the concerns of those worried about how people would react to broken promises, Khomeini argued that they should tell the people that expediting the process and putting the draft to a referendum is a necessity (*zarurat*) or expediency (*maslahat*), and that because the country was faced with such a necessity, they were compelled to renege on their promise.⁶⁷ Khomeini reminded Bani Sadr that the majority of the people would be voting on the basis of their Islamic convictions and that they would not be interested in the specifics of the constitution.⁶⁸ In effect Khomeini felt that if he needed to take particular measures, the people would follow him. For Khomeini, the necessity of putting in place the proper institutions of the state and securing the future of the revolution trumped the niceties of keeping promises and going through proper democratic motions.

Once again the debate between the two positions, with Khomeini clearly on the side of those who wished to put the draft to a direct vote without convening a Constituent Assembly, came to a head. At this point, Ayatollah Taleqani suggested a middle course: To dispel the danger of lengthy deliberations with some 350 representatives which would clearly slow the legitimization of the new regime, and in order to honor the promise that Khomeini had made to the people, he proposed that a smaller-sized assembly of some seventy members be convened. This became the Assembly of Experts (*Majlis-e Khobregan*).⁶⁹ Taleqani’s proposal met with both sides’ approval, and Khomeini agreed to this compromise and directed the minister of interior to prepare for the elections of the Assembly of Experts. The specific mandate of this Assembly, approved by the Revolutionary Council, was to study, review and approve the final draft of the constitution in one month.⁷⁰ As time would tell, once the

Assembly of Experts was convened, its members interpreted their task to review (*barrasy*) very differently from what the provisional government and the Revolutionary Council intended the word to mean.

The Short Life of the Draft Constitution and Its Opponents

Beginning May 23, 1979, the people were gradually informed by the Iranian press of the important decisions made during the watershed meeting at Qom. As of May 28, various clerical and lay officials began talking to the press about a smaller, consultative council that would replace the promised Constituent Assembly.⁷¹ Two questions split society into two warring factions over the assembly which was to review the draft: First, who was properly qualified to review the draft of the constitution – the professional civil lawyers and secular jurists or the clerical Islamic jurists? And second, what number of representatives in the assembly would guarantee the maximum political participation of the people – a large Constituent Assembly or a small Assembly of Experts? The debate over the size and name of the assembly obscured the main issues.

This split was the prelude to the struggle for political hegemony between secular and religious forces in society. The more secular-minded movements felt that a smaller assembly would enable the religious forces to impose a religious and non-democratic straightjacket on society. The two sides lined up against one another with their respective articles, declarations, meetings, huge street demonstrations and subsequent physical clashes. One side argued that the constitution should reflect the highest possible degree of popular sovereignty; the other argued that it should reflect the sovereignty of God, the clergy and the Guardian Jurist.⁷² This important alignment of forces and debates over the future of the Islamic Republic did not elude Khomeini's attention. On June 16, the complete text of the proposed constitution – as approved and finalized by Khomeini – the three sources of emulation, the members of the provisional government and the Revolutionary Council was published without any reference to the Rule of the Guardian Jurist.⁷³

Ironically, the two extreme sides of the secular and religious fence both argued for the complete and total revision of the draft constitution. The secular and leftist forces argued that the published draft failed to incorporate important articles of the human rights charter, and did not guarantee the democratic rights of the revolutionary forces, workers, ethnic groups and women, and was therefore unresponsive to the needs of the people.⁷⁴ The Islamic forces argued that the constitution of the Islamic Republic needed to be more Islamic. Only five days after the publication of the draft, Ayatollah Golpayegani, one of the three sources of emulation who had already read and approved the constitution, suddenly declared that it was necessary to include the supervisory role of the Guardian Jurist. On June 21, Golpayegani stated that without the rule of the Guardian Jurist, the government would be unjust and a usurper (*taghut*), which was a term that Khomeini had used in his Najaf book.⁷⁵ This was the beginning of many calls for the inclusion of the Rule of the Guardian Jurist. Now that the draft was to be sent to a body of elected representatives of the people for review and possibly a rewrite, it seemed normal that each side – both secular and Islamic – would compete to craft it to their own preferences. Almost a month after Golpayegani's message, Grand Ayatollah Mar'ashiye Najafi, who had also approved – or rather, not opposed – the published draft followed suit and commented that the constitution needed to include a clause affirming that the Rule of the Guardian Jurist was valid at all times.⁷⁶

Three days after Golpayegani's message, Ayatollah Makarem Shirazi referred to the Assembly of Experts (Majlis-e Khobregan), and stressed the importance of convening such a body. He wrote that in

terms of securing a position for the clergy, the published draft was inferior even to the old regime's constitution. He pointed out that the published draft had not envisaged a supervisory role for the Guardian Jurist (*faqih*).⁷⁷ Makarem Shirazi was adamant, however, that this supervisory role be included in such a way that it would not undermine the spirit of democracy and popular sovereignty. But the subtleties of Makaram Shirazi's attempt to include the supervisory role of the Guardian Jurist in the future constitution without undermining popular sovereignty was lost in the important threatening declaration signed by 110 "learned clerics of the Qom Seminary School" and published on July 4.⁷⁸ Reflecting on the published draft of the constitution, these clerics opined that the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran could only be successfully guaranteed by the Rule of the Guardian Jurist. They argued that the published draft was befitting of a Western constitution and unsuitable for the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Pragmatism in Khomeini's Politics

New conditions dictate new exigencies and necessities. Following the publication of the draft, criticism by oppositional organizations of varying shades – but primarily secular nationalist, liberal, left and Marxist as well as certain heterodox Islamic parties and organizations – began to mount. They criticized the change in size of the Constituent Assembly, questioned the degree of representation of the Assembly of Experts and found fault in the absence of "progressive" articles in the constitution compatible with human rights and the agenda of guaranteeing the safety of individual, ethnic, political and social rights.

Khomeini's reactions from his initial acceptance of a two-stage process for the approval of the draft to the day that Iranians voted for the candidates to the Assembly of Experts (May 22 – August 3, 1979) were goal oriented. He saw the debate on the Constituent Assembly versus Assembly of Experts as a criticism of the only existing organs of the state, namely the provisional government, Revolutionary Council, and himself. To him, the emphasis by the opposition on the Constituent Assembly was unproductive and divisive, as the smaller Assembly of Experts was also to be constituted by the elected representatives of the people. At the same time, Khomeini became increasingly sensitive and defensive about the secular forces' systematic criticism of the draft. He saw the criticism as an attempt to renegotiate the Islamic nature of the new state. First, he lashed out against those who challenged the government over the size of the assembly by arguing that given the various problems faced by the country, engaging in such debates was either because of ignorance or hatching a conspiracy.⁷⁹ At the time, Khomeini was faced with a multitude of problems which in his mind threatened the revolution. During the two and half months between May 22 and August 3, domestic and international problems were mounting. Internal discontent, instability, demonstrations, violence, workers' unrest, economic sabotage, ethnic revolts and political assassinations were further aggravated by Iraqi attacks on Iranian soil and widespread rumours of an impending foreign plot in cooperation with generals from the ancien regime.

Khomeini was also irritated by the silence of religious forces, which he expected to respond to the criticism of secular intellectuals and put forward their modifications of the draft, just as the secular forces had done. Khomeini felt as though he was almost single-handedly defending a package to the content and procedure of which he had no strong attachments. His approval of or non-opposition toward the final draft was only a matter of expediency because of his wanting a constitution in place as soon as possible. But its content was not what he would have opted for under ideal conditions. Khomeini had also clearly opposed the two-stage review and then approval procedure, which he had

begrudgingly conceded to and was now obliged to defend. He continued to argue that time was of vital importance, and that a large Constituent Assembly that might take some one to two years to deliberate would enable the enemies of the revolution to regroup and threaten it. He reiterated that a smaller assembly could finish reviewing the draft in one to two months.⁸⁰

There is another twist to this two-and-a-half-month period, between the decision at Qom to put the final draft through a two-stage process and the election day of the candidates to the Assembly of Experts, during which Khomeini found an exceptional window of opportunity. Khomeini, who considered a constituent assembly redundant, time-consuming and even a threat to the revolution, came to see the same institution as a democratically elected body capable of guaranteeing what he believed to be the Islamicity of the Republic. In the process of reviewing the draft, this assembly could use its mandate to include the Rule of the Guardian Jurist in the constitution, and after being put to referendum would have all the credentials of a democratically adopted principle.

It is safe to assume that until May 22, Khomeini had abandoned the rule of the Guardian Jurist for the sake of rapidly installing the state organs and institutions of the revolution as well as maintaining the wave of national euphoria, unity and cohesion. Rafsanjani believes that Khomeini was not even thinking of the concept of the Rule of the Guardian Jurist before this date. He says that “had the idea been on Khomeini’s mind, he would have told us about it”.⁸¹ At some point during this period, Khomeini came to realize that the debate over the content of the constitutional draft and form of the body reviewing it had opened up a Pandora’s box of deep disagreements over what the Islamic Republic ought to look like in its everyday functioning. How Islamic and how secular should it be? Should the constitution of the Islamic Republic reflect the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, or should it be in tune with the exegeses of Shi’i jurists rooted in Islamic sources?

Circumstances and opposition to immediately putting the draft to a referendum provided Khomeini with an exceptional opportunity. The Assembly of Experts could revive and realize part of his concept of an Islamic government. At this key point of inflection, Khomeini lowered his absolute protection of the draft and embraced the idea that the draft may be incomplete (*naqes*) and in need of corrections. Before changing his mind, Khomeini encouraged the members of the Assembly of Experts to quickly review and approve the final draft.⁸² Afterwards, around June 20, he prodded the clergy to review the draft carefully and present their opinion of it, underlining what they believed had been omitted.⁸³

The day before Ayatollah Golpayegani’s reference to the Rule of the Guardian Jurist was published, the transformation in Khomeini’s discourse became obvious in a speech to the clerics of Mashhad. At this time (June 20), he must have come to the conclusion that the assembly would be the ideal conduit for a constitution that would be more Islamic. In this speech, he advised the clergy to review every article of the draft, and make recommendations on what would be beneficial for Islam that was absent in this draft.⁸⁴ About a month later, almost at the same time as Ayatollah Mar’ashiye Najafi’s new opinions on the necessity of the Rule of the Guardian Jurist in the constitution was published, Khomeini’s position on the final draft shifted even more, and he publicly declared that this draft of the constitution was inconsequential and almost worthless (*hich chiz nist*). He then highlighted the important responsibility of Muslim experts in the Assembly to review and produce a constitution in perfect harmony with Islamic laws.⁸⁵

Khomeini’s position in relation to the final draft of the constitution shifted from approval and warnings about the possibility of omissions and oversights in it to demeaning the draft as a document that was neither sufficient nor binding. He concomitantly encouraged the members of the Assembly of Experts to reconsider and rewrite it with the aim of improving its Islamic credibility. From the opening session of the Assembly of Experts on August 19 – an interesting coincidence that it was the

day of the coup against Mosaddeq – it was evident that a strong clerical tendency was in favour of abandoning the final draft altogether. Ayatollah Mohammad Khamenei (Ali Khamenei's brother) argued that the members of the Assembly of Experts were elected by the people to review the draft and thus free to write whatever they thought was suitable. Working within the rigid confines of the draft was therefore unacceptable, as it would impinge on the liberty of thought and decision-making of the people's representatives.⁸⁶ Consequently, the Assembly of Experts abandoned the draft and wrote a different constitution.

In Khomeini's speeches, the emphasis on the need to change the final draft is in tandem with four other issues, all of which are related to the modality of effectuating this change. First, reflecting his irritation with the silence of religious forces, he chided the clergy for their passiveness and disinterest in entering the debate on the content of the draft, presenting proposals and writing articles in the press. He heeded the clerics not to sit by idle and allow others to review the draft and write articles about it in the press. At first, Khomeini was clearly worried that in the absence of the clergy's voice, the non-religious forces would be able to influence if not win the hearts and minds of a considerable portion of society.⁸⁷

Second, Khomeini reprimanded the secular intellectuals and their proposals on the constitution, seeking to demonstrate the un-Islamic nature of their objectives. In his regular speeches, Khomeini tried to demonstrate that the secular intellectual's criticism of the draft was proof of their ignorance and disrespect for Islam. As the date of the elections to the Assembly of Experts (August 3, 1979) approached, Khomeini gradually signalled to Iranians who they should and should not vote for as their representatives. He labelled the "others" as Westernized intellectuals, Marxists and morally lax secular forces that did not believe in Islam; were scared of Islam; disliked it, and worst of all, did not wish to see the installation of the Islamic Republic in Iran.⁸⁸

Third, Khomeini looked ahead to the reviewing, correcting, rewriting and Islamizing role that the elected members of the assembly could play, and began to directly instruct his audience on who they should vote for as their representatives. About a month and a half before the elections to the Assembly of Experts, Khomeini reminded the people that the choice of the right representatives to the Assembly of Experts is crucial, as they would be able to change and correct (*jarh o ta'dil*) and write the constitution.⁸⁹ Khomeini systematically emphasized the importance of voting for candidates who were devoted to and knowledgeable about Islam, and instructed the clergy to go to the far-away rural villages and hamlets in order to familiarize the people with those candidates that would determine the faith of Islam. He claimed that people should vote for those candidates introduced by *ulema* or the Islamic jurists.⁹⁰ Less than a month before the elections, Khomeini escalated his tone and commanded the clergy to compel (*vadar konid*) the people to vote for designated candidates, the majority of who should be clerics.⁹¹ Worried about the election of "undesirable elements" – the so-called Westernized or Marxist intellectuals – Khomeini warned that even if four of these un-Islamic characters entered the Assembly of Experts they could have the power to influence others and distort the document which was intended to express the identity of the Islamic Republic.⁹²

Fourth, Khomeini emphasized the importance of the Islamicity of the constitution. He spoke of drawing up a "Constitutional Law of Islam" for Iran, in which, naturally, the Islamic experts or clergy would have to play the major role.⁹³ The day after the publication of Makarem Shirazi's article on the necessity of the Guardian Jurist's supervision in the country, Khomeini argued that "we can not accept any other government but that of God", adding that in Islam the chief (*ra'is*) and commander of the Islamic army needed to be someone who acted in accordance with Islamic laws.⁹⁴

Some twenty days before the election of representatives to the Assembly of Experts, and after Ayatollah Montazeri's strongly argued for the inclusion of the Rule of the Guardian Jurist in a lengthy proposal submitted on July 8,⁹⁵ Khomeini made a statement which offered a glimpse as to how he intended to broach the rule of the Guardian Jurist. On July 12, in reference to the "collection and writing" (*tadvin*) of the constitution – no longer its examination and review (*barrasy*) – Khomeini said:

At this time we are receiving many proposals which are slightly at odds with the flow. In those areas we have to move step by step. In other words, there is an appropriate time for considering [addressing] each issue. There are certain issues that should be dealt with now, there are those that need to be dealt with later, and there are those that come even later.⁹⁶

By July 12, 1979, the idea of the Rule of the Guardian Jurist had become pronounced. The reference to proposals going against the flow is probably a hint at the major change that would have to be made to the final draft. Khomeini was clearly interested and invested in this opportunity, but in his pragmatic approach there was a list of priorities to follow without precipitating issues. His first concern at the time was the composition of the Assembly of Experts, which he hoped to staff with reliable and loyal clerics. Once that was achieved, he would include the Rule of the Guardian Jurist in the constitution.

The Rule of the Guardian Jurist Defines the Constitution of the Islamic Republic.

The results of the election to the Assembly of Experts proved that Rafsanjani's assessment of society's political tendencies was correct. It also fulfilled the wish of Ayatollah Khomeini. Of all representatives elected to the Assembly of Experts, 68 per cent were clerics. From the seventy-three representatives, fifty were members of the clergy; fifty-eight were on the list of the Great Islamic Coalition, the strongest axis of which was the Islamic Republic Party. Eight were on the list of Bazargan's Iran Freedom Movement, and seven were on the list of Ayatollah Shariatmadari's Islamic Republican Party of the Muslim People.⁹⁷ Ayatollahs Montazeri and Makarem Shirazi, who had written and published their opinion on the necessity of the Rule of the Guardian Jurist, were both members of the Assembly.

Hasan Ayat, an enigmatic lay figure who had been a member of Mozafar Baqa'i's Toiler's Party of the Iranian People and had joined the Islamic Republic Party after the revolution, was also elected as a member of the Assembly of Experts. Ayat and Ayatollah Ali Khamenei had been key speakers at the Congress of Muslims Critical of the Constitution organized by the Islamic Republic Party.⁹⁸ The purpose of this seminar, held starting June 25 (before any public proposals were made to include the Rule of the Guardian Jurist in the constitution) at Tehran University was to criticize the draft of the constitution. One of the most important demands of this Congress published after a number of meetings was that "since the rights and responsibilities envisaged for the President could only belong to the Guardian Jurist, either the President must be a Guardian Jurist or the rights and responsibilities of the Guardian Jurist must be included and enunciated separately".⁹⁹ Ayat is considered the person who revived the concept of the Rule of the Guardian Jurist, convinced key clerics such as Montazeri to promote the necessity of including it in the constitution and vigorously pushed the idea within the

Assembly of Experts.¹⁰⁰ This assessment is shared by Mohammad Khamenei, who was also a member of the Assembly of Experts, who believes that Ayat is the man responsible for the inclusion of the article on the Rule of the Guardian Jurist in the constitution.¹⁰¹

At the second meeting of the Assembly of Experts, Ayatollah Montazeri, whose position as a staunch protagonist of the Rule of the Guardian Jurist was well known publicly, obtained forty votes and became the president of the Assembly by defeating Ayatollah Taleqani.¹⁰² Montazeri's initial high vote indicated that the Assembly was favourably inclined towards a key personality very much implicated in the promotion of the Rule of the Guardian Jurist. The fact that Ayat, another key figure associated with the idea, was also elected as secretary (*dabir*) of the Assembly demonstrated the direction which the Assembly would take on this issue. On September 12, 1979, Article Five of the new constitution, which established the Rule of the Guardian Jurist, was ratified in the Assembly of Experts with fifty-three votes in favour, eight against and four abstentions.

There is no doubt that the inclusion of the Rule of the Guardian Jurist in the constitution realized Khomeini's dream in Najaf. Exactly one week after the ratification of Article Five, Khomeini first asked the people not to be scared of the Rule of the Guardian Jurist. He then threatened those who opposed it that such a disagreement implied rejecting the Imams and Islam.¹⁰³ Khomeini later repeated his Najaf position, as Ayatollah Golpayegani had done, that in the absence of the Rule of the Guardian Jurist any form of government would be deemed unjust and illegal (*taghut*) and finally equated the Rule of the Guardian Jurist with Islam and the word of God.¹⁰⁴

The outcome of the process was Khomeini's most preferred or optimal solution. But out of pragmatism and a sense of urgency, he did settle for a less than-optimal end result. The unanimous testimony of all those who were present at the May 22, 1979, meeting in Qom between Khomeini and the members of the provisional government and Revolutionary Council bears witness to the fact that Khomeini wanted to put the final draft (without any reference to the Rule of the Guardian Jurist) to a popular referendum. This demonstrates Khomeini's political flexibility and sense of expediency. Most importantly, in a speech on June 15, 1979, Khomeini candidly spoke of his position at the May 22 meeting. He publicly announced that he was against any assembly reviewing the draft and supported the idea of publishing the final draft, thus enabling the people to see and study it, then putting it to their direct yes-or-no vote. Khomeini explained that the reason he conceded to the idea of an assembly as an intermediary stage was to accommodate the intellectuals.¹⁰⁵

The historical facts do not concur with theories that maintain that because Khomeini had written about the Rule of the Guardian Jurist in Najaf, he was subsequently intent on and capable of skilfully manoeuvring and manipulating people and events to have it included in the Iranian Constitution. Contrary to a grand scheme or conspiracy theory with Khomeini at its centre, it was the inflexibility and adamancy of honest, ethical, democratic and highly principled men such as Bazargan and Sahabi which prevented Iran from having a constitution without the Rule of the Guardian Jurist. Political ethics, an erroneous assessment of the balance of political forces, unfamiliarity with the social psychology of the people along with the absence of political realism and flexibility on the part of the proponents of a Constituent Assembly seem to have been much more instrumental than Khomeini in the final inclusion of the Rule of the Guardian Jurist in Iran's constitution. One could hypothesize that had the final draft been put to a referendum and naturally approved, Khomeini would have qualified it as equally Islamic and also labelled anyone who opposed it as enemies of the Islamic Republic, Imams, Islam and God.

- [1](#) Hossein Ali Montazeri, *Memoires of Ayatollah Montazeri* (Paris: Baran, 1379/2000), pp. 143–144.
- [2](#) Ali Akbar Mohtashemi, *Khaterat 'Ali-Akbar Mohtashemi* (Tehran: Sazeman Tabliqat Elami, 1376/1997), pp. 396–397
- [3](#) *Ibid.*, p. 337.
- [4](#) M. A. Haji Beygi Kondori, *Khaterat Hojatoleslam val Moslemin Amid Zanjani* (Tehran: Markaz Asnad Enqelab Eslami, 1379/2000), p. 83.
- [5](#) M. H. Rajabi, *Zendeginameh Siyasi Emam Khomeini* (Tehran: Vezarat Farhang va Ershad Eslami, 1969), p. 281.
- [6](#) Khatam Yazdi, *Khaterat Ayatollah Khatam Yazdi* (Tehran: Markaz Asnad Enqelab Eslami, 1381/2002), p. 83.
- [7](#) Ruhollah Khomeini, *Hokumat Eslami* (n.p., n.d., n.d.), p. 5.
- [8](#) Yazdi, *Khaterat Ayatollah Khatam Yazdi*, pp. 95–96.
- [9](#) *Ibid.*
- [10](#) A. Kordi, *Ostad Shahid be ravayat Asnad* (Tehran: Markaz Asnad Enqelab Eslami, 1383/2004), p. 143.

11 M. R. Ahmadi, *Khaterat Ayatollah Taheri Khoramabadi*, vol. ii, (Tehran: Markaz Asnad Enqelab Eslami, 1384/2005), p. 64.

12 Khomeini, *Hokumat Eslami*, p. 5.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 34.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 99.

15 *Ibid.*, pp. 100, 104.

16 *Ibid.*, p. 35.

17 *Ibid.*, p.36.

18 *Ibid.*, p. 37.

19 *Ibid.*, pp.37, 38.

20 *Ibid.*, p.69.

21 *Ibid.*, pp. 25–26.

[22 Ibid.](#), pp. 41–43.

[23 Ibid.](#), p. 54.

[24 Ibid.](#), p. 41.

[25 Ibid.](#), p. 52.

[26 Ibid.](#), pp. 55, 149.

[27 Ibid.](#), p. 56.

[28 Ibid.](#), p. 57.

[29 Ibid.](#), p. 79.

[30 Ibid.](#), pp. 79, 80, 81, 82, 85, 88.

[31 Ibid.](#), p. 23.

[32 Ibid.](#), pp. 26–27.

[33](#) [Ibid.](#), pp. 30, 57, 78, 80.

[34](#) [Ibid.](#), p. 26.

[35](#) [Ibid.](#), p. 46.

[36](#) *Keyhan* (11 Shahrivar 1358/1979) quoted in *Nameh* (Shomareh 26, nimeh Mehr 1382/2003).

[37](#) *Mehrnameh*, (1, Dey 1389/2010).

[38](#) *Keyhan* (11 Shahrivar 1358/1979) quoted in *Nameh* (Shomareh 26, nimeh Mehr 1382/2003).

[39](#) *Mehrnameh* (1, Dey 1389/2010).

[40](#) *Nameh* (Shomareh 26, nimeh Mehr 1389/2010).

[41](#) [Ibid.](#)

[42](#) M. Razavi, *Khaterat Sadr-e Enqelab* (Tehran: Nashr-e Shahid Said Mohebbi, 1387/2008), p. 115.

[43](#) *Mehrnameh* (1, Dey 1389/2010).

[44](#) [Ibid.](#).

[45](#) [Ibid.](#).

[46](#) [Ibid.](#).

[47](#) *Nameh* (Shomareh 26, nimeh Mehr 1389/2010).

[48](#) [Ibid.](#).

[49](#) [Ibid.](#).

[50](#) *Yadavar* (Azar va Zemestan 1388/2009).

[51](#) [Ibid.](#).

[52](#) [Ibid.](#).

[53](#) Abbas Amir Entezam, *An Suve Eteham*, vol. ii, (Tehran: Nashr Ney, 1381/2002), p. 23.

[54](#) *Yadavar* (Azar va Zemestan 1388/2009); *Nameh* (Shomareh 26, nimeh Mehr 1389/2010).

- [55](#) *Yadavar* (Azar va Zemestan 1388/2009).
- [56](#) *Nameh* (Shomareh 26, nimeh Mehr 1389/2010).
- [57](#) Abdolhassan Bani Sadr, *Khiyanat be Omid* (n.p., n.p., n.d.), p. 386.
- [58](#) *Nameh* (Shomareh 26, nimeh Mehr 1389/2010).
- [59](#) H. Eshkevari, *Dar Takapuye Azadi* (Tehran: Entesharate Qalam, 1379/2000), p. 199.
- [60](#) *Yadavar* (Azar va Zemestan 1388/2009).
- [61](#) H. Eshkevari, *Dar Takapuye Azadi*, p. 199.
- [62](#) *Ibid.*, p. 200.
- [63](#) *Yadavar* (Azar va Zemestan 1388).
- [64](#) Bani Sadr, *Khiyanat be Omid*, pp. 61, 386.
- [65](#) *Ettela'at* (1 Khordad 1358/1979).

- [66](#) Entezam, *An Suve Eteham*, p. 25.
- [67](#) [Ibid.](#); Bani Sadr, *Khiyanat be Omid*, p. 387; Sadegh Zibakalam, *Hashemi Bedune Rotoush* (Tehran: Entesharat Rowzaneh, 1378/1999), p. 74.
- [68](#) M. Razavi, *Hashemi va Enqelab* (Tehran: Hamshahri, 1376/1997), p. 189.
- [69](#) H. Eshkevari, *Dar Takapuye Azadi* (Tehran: Entesharate Qalam, 1379/2000), p. 201; *Yadavar* (Azar va Zemestan 1388/2009).
- [70](#) Entezam, *An Suve Eteham*, pp. 133, 230.
- [71](#) *Keyhan* (7 Khordad 1358/1979); *Ettela'at* (8 Khordad 1358/1979).
- [72](#) *Ettela'at* (7 Tir 1358).
- [73](#) *Ettela'at*; *Keyhan*; *Jomhuriye Eslami* (26 Khordad 1358/1979).
- [74](#) See “Jebheye Demokratic Melliye Iran”, *Ettela'at* (17 Ordibehesht and 4 Tir 1358/1979); and Manuchehr Hezar Khani, *Ettela'at* (2 Tir 1358/1979).
- [75](#) *Ettela'at* (31 Khordad 1358/1979).

[76](#) *Ettela'at* (27 Tir 1358/1979).

[77](#) *Ettela'at* (3 Tir 1358/1979).

[78](#) See “E'lame Khatar-e Fozalaye Howzeh Elmiyeh Qom”, *Ettela'at* (12 Tir, 1358/1979).

[79](#) Ruhollah Khomeini, *Sahifeh-ye Nur*, vol. vii, (Tehran: Vezarate Ershad Eslami, 1361/1982), p. 113.

[80](#) *Ibid.*, pp. 113–115.

[81](#) Zibakalam, *Hashemi Bedune Rotoush*, pp. 73–74.

[82](#) Khomeini, *Sahifeh-ye Nur*, vol. vii, pp. 132, 137, 140, 146.

[83](#) *Ibid.*, pp. 132, 137, 140, 146, 152, 155.

[84](#) *Ibid.*, pp. 152–153.

[85](#) Ruhollah Khomeini, *Sahifeh-ye Nur*, vol. viii (Tehran: Vezarate Ershad Eslami, 1361/1982), p. 213.

[86](#) *Surate Mashruhe Mozakerat Majles Barrasiye Naha'i Qanun Assasiye Jomhuriye Eslamiye Iran*,

p.13.

[87](#) Khomeini, *Sahifeh-ye Nur*, vol. vii, pp. 152–153.

[88](#) [Ibid.](#), pp. 137, 232.

[89](#) [Ibid.](#), p. 156.

[90](#) [Ibid.](#), pp. 232–233.

[91](#) Khomeini, *Sahifeh-ye Nur*, vol. viii, p. 74.

[92](#) [Ibid.](#), pp. 74–75.

[93](#) Khomeini, *Sahifeh-ye Nur*, vol. vii, p. 131.

[94](#) Khomeini, *Sahifeh-ye Nur*, p. 202.

[95](#) Montazeri, *Khaterate Ayatollah Hosein’ali Montazeri*, pp. 449–454.

[96](#) Khomeini, *Sahifeh-ye Nur*, vol. viii, p. 109.

[97](#) *Keyhan* (4,6,18 Mordad 1358/1979).

[98](#) K. Esmaili, *The Islamic Republic Party* (Tehran: Markaz Asnad Enqelab Eslami, 1386/2007), pp. 152–153.

[99](#) *Keyhan* (24 Tir 1358/1979).

[100](#) *Yadavar* (Azar va Zemestan 1388/2009); *Nameh* (Nimeh Mehr 1382/2003).

[101](#) *Hamshahriy-e Mah* (Ordibehesht 1390/11).

[102](#) *Surate Mashruhe Mozakerat Majles Barrasiye Naha'i Qanun Assasiye Jomhuriye Eslamiye Iran*, p. 21.

[103](#) Ruhollah Khomeini, *Sahifeh-ye Nur*, vol. ix (Tehran: Vezarate Ershad Eslami, 1361/1982), p. 170.

[104](#) *Ibid.*, pp. 253–255.

[105](#) Khomeini, *Sahifeh-ye Nur*, vol. vii, p. 123.

5 Khatt-e Imam

The Followers of Khomeini's Line

L. A. Reda

Introduction

Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini based his conception of revolution on a return to core Islamic values and the restoration of Islamic rule of law in Iran, placing him and the politically conscious *ulema* (religious scholars) in direct opposition to the modernizing reforms of the Pahlavi monarchy. Khomeini's rejection of the monarchy's vision of a "modern" Iran and U.S. imperialism was partly based on his interpretation of Shi'i tradition. The Pahlavis had not only promoted a secular political and cultural trend in Iran, but had also done so to the advantage of foreign influence, particularly the United States. For Khomeini, the Shi'i history of rebellion against oppression and dispossession was a great source of inspiration for his struggle. Consequently, the fate of Ali and the Imams – who according to Shi'i Islam were arbitrarily deposed from their rightful authority to rule the *umma* – was integrated into Khomeini's notion of revolution.

For Khomeini, the debilitated *ulema* needed to take a revolutionary path in order to restore Islamic rule of law in Iran. To this end, he embraced the anti-imperialist sentiments among the Iranian population, including the Iranian youth. Hence, Khomeini recognized the important role that the Muslim youth would play in advancing Islamic governance in Iran. These students, and the clergy who supported Khomeini in the 1960s and 1970s, became known as the followers of *khatt-e imam* or "Imam Khomeini's line" on the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979. Soon after, this political affiliation spread beyond Iran's borders. The Islamic Republic's policy of exporting the revolution facilitated the creation of Islamic resistance groups such as Hizbullah in Lebanon. Hizbullah, too, proclaimed themselves as followers of Khomeini's line.

The first part of this chapter will set out the foundations of Khomeini's conception of revolution. This section traces the impact of Islamic Shi'i tradition and Iranian history on Khomeini's view of Iranian politics and society under the Pahlavi monarchy. The second part discusses the political thought of the Followers of the Imam's Line (namely, the Muslim Student Followers of the Imam's Line); the most prominent group of revolutionary Iranian clerics in the build-up to and aftermath of the 1979 revolution; and the Lebanese Hizbullah.

Shi'i Doctrine and Khomeini's Idea of Revolution

Two important elements comprise Khomeini's conception of revolution. On the one hand, Khomeini's interpretation of "rebellion" according to Shi'i tradition and the history of the participation of the *ulema* in politics formed the foundations of his Islamic interpretation of revolution. On the other hand, the Pahlavi regime's close ties with foreign powers, and its association with Iran's economic and social problems, were the immediate issues that determined the need for revolution. Khomeini attempted to relate the dogmatic tenets of Islam regarding resistance to

oppression with rebellion against the Shah. To that end, he frequently emphasized the history of rebellion in Shi'i Islam: "The Shi'i School of thought, which is the prevalent one in Iran, has had certain distinguishing characteristics from the very beginning. While other schools have preached submission to rulers, even if they are corrupt and oppressive, Shi'ism has preached resistance against them and denounced them as illegitimate."¹ In a similar vein, Khomeini continuously highlighted the Shi'i tendency to resist in particular in his speeches and interviews in the 1970s: "[W]e Shi'ites, who base our understanding of Islam on what we have received from 'Ali and his descendants consider only the Imams and those whom they appointed to be legitimate holders of authority. This is the root of the matter: Sunni-populated countries have believed in obeying their rulers, whereas the Shi'is have always believed in rebellion."² These statements illustrate how Khomeini characterized revolution, resistance and rebellion as being intrinsically Islamic. Khomeini often referred to the exceptional, historically grounded act of rebellion in Shi'i Islam. According to him, Muslims have the duty to rebel against repressive rule³ in the same way that Ali ibn Abi Talib and his followers rose against "illegitimate" rulers. Here, the question of the succession of the Prophet Mohammad after his death, which is central to Shi'i Islam, is important.⁴ Ali was the son of the Prophet's uncle, and one of the first to embrace Islam.⁵ The Shi'i maintain that the Prophet appointed Ali as his successor. On the death of Mohammad in 632 CE, however, "an ad hoc assembly of Muslims chose Abu Bakr, a close companion to the Prophet, to be the leader of the Islamic community, the *khalifah* (caliph),"⁶ under the pretext that prophethood and caliphate should be separate entities.⁷ It is said that although he believed himself to be the rightful successor of the Prophet, Ali was forced to pledge allegiance to Abu Bakr and the successive caliphs, Umar and Uthman.⁸ Since then, Sunnis have recognized the leadership of the first four caliphs, whereas the Shi'i have insisted that only Ali's succession was legitimate.

After the assassination of Uthman, Ali consented to take over the caliphate "and was accepted by the vast majority of Muslims in Medina and other provinces of the Empire."⁹ However, the governor of Syria – Mu'awiya – rejected Ali's leadership and demanded vengeance for the death of Uthman. Mu'awiya's and Ali's armies fought each other in Siffin (now Assad Dam in Syria), but the battle did not settle the conflict, and a council of arbitration was convened.¹⁰ There are no clear accounts of the results of this arbitration, but it is said that "Mu'awiya interpreted the judgement in his own favour,"¹¹ and that Ali faced opposition within his own army for having conceded to arbitration in the first place. The sections of Ali's army that rejected arbitration separated themselves from Ali, "thus becoming known as the Khawarij or 'Seceders.'"¹² Ali subsequently fought against the Khawarij in the Battle of Nahrawan, and was later killed by a Kharijite seeking to avenge the men lost to Ali's army in that battle.

Given the importance of these events in Shi'i political history, Khomeini's allegorical references to Imam Ali bore a dual function. On the one hand, they displayed Khomeini's approach to Islamic governance and revolution by juxtaposing the deeply rooted Shi'i principle of rebellion with the contemporary plight of Iranian society under the rule of the Shah. On the other hand, Khomeini's reference to Ali was used to promote an understanding of leadership akin to that of the Prophet and subsequent caliphs in the form of an Islamic government. In line with the Shi'i canon, Khomeini portrayed the political alienation of Ali as a violation of divine justice and, more importantly, as a benchmark for the definition of oppression in Pahlavi Iran. In line with this argument, Khomeini considered resisting the Pahlavi regime a canonical duty legitimated by the precedence set in Shi'i political history.

Moreover, Khomeini's idea of revolution was inextricably linked to the idea of fighting

oppression. For him, the end of oppression could only be guaranteed by the establishment of an Islamic government. As such, he endorsed the Shi'i conception of oppression inspired by the fate of Ali and his successors. According to Khomeini, the Shi'i principle of *zalama* (oppression) does not merely enjoy historical relevance or serve as an exclusively theological image. Rather, this Shi'i principle possessed the highly political underpinnings that Khomeini would draw on during the preparatory stages of the Islamic revolution. An example of this can be found in the following excerpt from Khomeini's political testament: "We are honoured that our Infallible Imams (AS) suffered imprisonment, banishment and finally attained martyrdom in their efforts to advance Islam; to implement the teachings and commandments of the Holy Qur'an – of which the establishment of the sovereignty of justice is but one dimension – and; to overthrow the rule of the oppressors and of the arrogant."¹³ The martyrdom of the Imams defines the state of oppression or *zalama*. This interpretation, exclusive to Shi'i Islam and especially to Twelver Shi'i Islam, turns the leaders of the *umma* into persecuted men whose struggle for the establishment of justice in the world was arbitrarily brought to an end. Nevertheless, the *zalama* of the Imams generally transmits a positive message to the adherents of Twelver Shi'i Islam, as it formed the necessary precondition for action against the *zalim* (an oppressive individual or political order).¹⁴ When the martyrdom of Husayn is mentioned, what is often emphasized is the significance of being oppressed, but ready to sacrifice one's life in the fight against injustice "in order to be liberated in this world and to find salvation in the next."¹⁵

The martyrdom of Husayn, the third Imam, is also of great relevance to the definition of the oppressed in Shi'i Islam. Husayn was the grandson of the Prophet that succeeded the second Imam, Hassan.¹⁶ Husayn did not initially rebel against the rule of Mu'awiya, the first Umayyad caliph. However, when Mu'awiya nominated his son, Yazid, to succeed him as caliph,¹⁷ it is believed that Husayn was urged by his supporters in Kufa to revolt against the Umayyads and overthrow Syrian rule.¹⁸ As Husayn made his way towards Kufa, the governor of Syria took notice and made arrangements to prevent him from reaching his destination. Husayn and his small group of partisans reached the plain of Karbala on the second day of the month of Muharram.¹⁹ On the tenth day of Muharram, Husayn and seventy-two of his companions were killed by Umayyad troops.²⁰ Husayn's death is remembered by the Shi'i during 'ashura,²¹ an important day for commemoration within Shi'ism.

In this sense, "*mazlum* is a concept which also defines, in opposition to all that is *zalim* or oppressive, the individual who is *ma'zul*, or oppressed, who alone can become what al-Husayn is for the Shi'i religious conscience."²² This is a defining element of the Shi'i doctrine of martyrdom or *shahadat*, as much as it is of great relevance to the Shi'i understanding of oppression. It is argued that, according to radical Shi'ism, "martyrdom is commonly understood as the most desirable destiny and a highly appreciated virtue."²³ Ahmadi explains that "the fact that a small group of people consciously and voluntarily fought against the mighty army of the caliph in order to realize what they believed to be for the good of the Muslim community has given the Shi'a an example of self-abnegation for the sake of a greater reality."²⁴ This image is essential in the Shi'i-Iranian conception of oppression, which is not only found in Khomeini's conception of revolution, but also in the publications of Iranian Marxist political groups such as the Fedaiyan-e Khalq.²⁵

For Khomeini in particular, "[t]he maltreatment of Imam Hussein by the people of Kufeh culminated in history's greatest epic event, the martyrdom of Hussein."²⁶ Khomeini viewed Shi'i Islam as "a revolutionary school and the continuation of the Prophet's true Islam, as the Shi'ite Muslims themselves are [and] have always been under mean attacks by despots and the colonialists."²⁷

Furthermore, he highlighted the importance of fighting oppression as a path towards the afterlife:

You, Mujahid (crusading) nation, move under an emblem and banner that is waving everywhere in the moral and material world! Whether you are aware of it or not, you are treading in a path that is the path of all prophets and is the only path to happiness and bliss! This is the incentive or motive of the prophets in accepting and embracing martyrdom. This is what makes martyrdom to them sweeter than honey.²⁸

In this paradigm, the driving force of revolution becomes the struggle in this world for justice and against oppression: “Without a doubt, the Islamic Revolution of Iran is singular and unique among all revolutions; unique in its emergence, in its fighting character and in its incentive for uprising and revolt. Certainly this was a sacred gift, a divine present from God to the oppressed and pillaged Iranian nation.”²⁹ As such, Islamic tradition would underpin the resistance to oppressive rule and foreign interference. For Khomeini, it was Islamic doctrine and the Shi’i history of revolt that gave meaning to opposition of the Pahlavi monarchy and imperialism. Khomeini’s statements before and after 1979 demonstrate that, in his view, the success of the revolution and the establishment of the Islamic government were dependent on the revolutionary forces’ moral position. This revolutionary vision came to fruition by adapting Islamic tenets and Shi’i political doctrine to the realities of twentieth-century Iran.

Shi’i tradition, the Clergy and the State

Khomeini’s emphasis on the return to Islam through revolution is also the product of a long tradition of Islamic politics in Iran. Khomeini believed that the establishment of a government based on *shariah* could only be attained through restoring the leadership of the *ulema*. His views on the role of the *ulema* in reviving Islamic politics were based on Shi’i tradition and the historical partnership between the *ulema* and the government in Persia since the sixteenth century. The historicity of the *ulema*’s involvement in Iranian politics was central in Khomeini’s idea of an Islamic revolution, and his approach to mobilizing the Iranian *ulema* in the struggle against the Pahlavi monarchy and foreign interference.

Khomeini’s conception of the politically active *faqih* is rooted in the Shi’i view of leadership, or *Imamat*, reformed by the Shi’i endorsement of *ijtihad* (exegesis) of the “sources of divine knowledge.” For all Muslim sects, the leadership of the *umma* belonged first and foremost to the Prophet Mohammed. Following his death, the Shi’i doctrine held that authority over the *umma* was bestowed to Ali and his descendents.³⁰ The canon states that the eleven successors to Ali – the Imams – were entitled to lead the *umma*. In Shi’i Islam, “The Imams are also the guardians (*vali*) of the people.”³¹ With the Occultation of the Twelfth Imam, the succession of legitimate guardianship of Islamic jurisprudence came to an end. According to majority Shi’i doctrine, the Twelfth Imam’s return will lead to the establishment of legitimate Islamic rule on earth.³²

The endorsement of the Imamiyah principle of succession dates back to the Safavid rule over Persia between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries.³³ The first Safavid Shah of Iran, Ismail I, made Shi’i Islam the official religion of the Persian Empire in 1501, and aimed to create a state “in which religious ideology would be identified with political necessity.”³⁴ Successive Safavid kings legitimized their authority by declaring direct descent from the seventh Shi’i Imam, Musa.³⁵ The

Safavid era became characterized by the Twelver Shi'i *ulema* gaining influence as authority figures: the *mujtahids* "served as custodians of religious practice, judges, expounders of Islamic law, ministers, professors of theology, and even heads and administrators of religious endowments."³⁶

Both the historical development in the Shi'i view of the role of the *mujtahid* during the Occultation of the last Imam, and the political history of Iran since the Safavids point to the uneasy but close relationship that exists within Shi'ism between religion and politics. The concept of *velayat-e faqih* has as its central premise the doctrine of *al-ghaybat al-kubra*, which refers to the Greater and final Occultation of the Twelfth and last Imam in Shi'i Islam. According to Twelver Shi'ism, the first occultation of the Twelfth Imam meant that communication was maintained indirectly, and that his rulings were passed on to the Shi'i *umma* via intermediaries. This is referred to as The Period of Short Occultation (*al-ghaybat al-sughra*). However, as this line of communication ended, it was interpreted that the Twelfth Imam had entered the period of Greater Occultation (*al-ghaybat al-kubra*), where even indirect communication became impossible. For the majority of Shi'i believers, the Twelfth Imam is the *mahdi*, who has millenarian characteristics and will return to earth to establish justice on the *umma*.³⁷

In light of the importance of this canon within Shi'ism, the Safavid dynasty was characterized by its efforts to utilize it during the period of Greater Occultation. The Safavid state was in essence a collaborative politico-religious venture between the kings and the *ulema*, and the Safavid dynasty became characterized by a progressively competitive relationship between the two. The '*alim* or *faqih* (religious scholar) came to be considered the ultimate interpreter of the law (*mujtahid*): he who would ensure the enactment of the law and represent the "Hidden" Imam on earth. Similarly, Khomeini believed that the legacy of political torpor left by the Greater Occultation of the Imam could be alleviated by implementing the theory of *velayat-e faqih*, wherein the *marja-e taqlid*, or source of emulation, would occupy a similar role to that of the Safavid '*alim*. In his own words:

The authority for Taqlid must be a person who is learned ('*alim*), *mujtahid*, just ('*adil*) and pious (*vara'*) in matters regarding the divine faith. The (relevant) tradition says: "If a person from among the jurists is one protecting oneself (from evil), safeguarding the faith, resisting his temptations and submitting himself before the commandments of his Lord, then let the laity follow him."³⁸

This marriage between religion and the state continued during the Qajar period (1785–1925). The *ulema* participated in the Constitutional Revolution (1906–1911), although its purpose was to modernize the social and political structures in Iran.³⁹ Religious scholars joined the revolution aiming to abolish the absolute monarchical system "in order to realize their own ideals of an Islamic state."⁴⁰ In fact, it is argued that the alliance between two of the most influential *ulema* at the time, Abdallah Bihbahani and Mohammad Tabataba'i, marked the beginning of the revolution.⁴¹ The Constitutional Revolution is viewed as the last instance where the Iranian *ulema* was politically organized until the emergence of Khomeini's movement.⁴² Their involvement resulted in the establishment of constitutional law that "was strongly affected by *shari'a*."⁴³ Nevertheless, opposing views on the repercussions of constitutional reform among religious scholars⁴⁴ and the question of maintaining kingly supremacy⁴⁵ led to general disenchantment with constitutionalism and gradual political quietism among the *ulema* during the first half of the twentieth century.

Consequently, a central theme in Khomeini's revolutionary programme was the continued

disempowerment of the clergy in Iran due to the Shah's secular reforms. Reza Shah's reign (1925–1941) was mainly directed towards modernizing Iran and putting into motion “a series of legal reforms [that] progressively reduced the judicial role of the clergy and increasingly introduced a modern, nonclerical judiciary. ... In 1939–1940 *shari'a* courts were abolished and European-model civil and penal codes were adopted.”⁴⁶ Hence, between 1942 and 1963, Khomeini directed his political activism against the Pahlavi monarchy and the quietist clergy. With the publication of *Kashf-e Asrar* in 1943,⁴⁷ Khomeini provided his “first adumbration of *vilayat-i faqih* (the governance of the *faqih*), the doctrine which was to become the cornerstone of the constitution of the Islamic Republic.”⁴⁸ In this book, Khomeini describes the role of the revolutionary *ulema*:

When we say that the government and the leadership at this time should in the hand of the *fuqaha* we do not mean that the *faqih* is the king or the minister or the military officer or the municipality worker. We mean that there needs to be formed a *majlis al mua'sisin* (a council of founders) from the citizens of a certain country which forms the governments, changes the authority and elects a new authority. This council should be formed by religious *mujtahedeen* who know the laws of God.⁴⁹

In his 1970 lectures on Islamic government, entitled “Hukumat-e Islami, ” Khomeini continued to develop his ideas on the role of the *ulema* in politics. He called on the *ulema* to restore Islamic rule of law as a means of rebellion against political alienation and foreign influence. In these lectures, Khomeini restated that all Muslims – especially the *ulema* – bore the responsibility of spreading knowledge of Islam.⁵⁰ According to Khomeini, Islam was to govern over all political, social, cultural and intellectual affairs of the *umma*. Additionally, he appealed to the *ulema* to focus on educating the Iranian Muslim youth. For example, as the commemoration of 'ashura was prohibited by the Shah, Khomeini urged the *ulema* to continue to commemorate it as an act of resistance and prevent the dismissal of Islamic traditions among the youth.⁵¹

Khomeini and the Iranian Youth

Khomeini also developed his understanding of revolution by analyzing the political trends among the Iranian youth during the Pahlavi era. He quickly identified that support from the Muslim youth would have a great impact on the future of the revolutionary Islamic government. Khomeini recognized that highly politicized Iranians – especially university students – strongly rejected foreign interference. He accordingly combined anti-imperialism with the restoration of Islamic rule of law in his discourse when addressing young Iranian students:

The universities must change fundamentally. They must be reconstructed in such a way that our young people will receive a correct Islamic education side-by-side with their acquisition of formal learning, not a Western education. This is our aim, to prevent one group of our young people from being drawn to the West and another group to the East.⁵²
[...]

To Islamize the universities means to make them autonomous, independent of the West and independent of the East, so that we have an independent country with an independent university system and an independent culture.⁵³

In this sense, Khomeini exploited the pre-existing anti-imperialist sentiments among the Iranian youth. He often called on the youth to struggle against the “reactionary elements of the country,” in reference to foreign or “western” culture promoted by the Pahlavi dynasty:

You educated youth are the men of tomorrow and the leading personalities of the society’s future. You should be vigilant and struggle against the retrogressive, divisive elements in your country. If you pay this matter due attention, you will find that the most important cause of the decline of the Muslims is the unawareness and neglect of the redemptory teachings of the true Islam.⁵⁴

Also, Khomeini made use of religious allegories in order to parallel the resistance to oppression with the defence of Islam in mobilizing the Iranian youth. Khomeini depicted the youth as a key force in the struggle to preserve Islamic values and establish Islamic rule of law in Iran. In the following passage, Khomeini tackled the historicity of the Islamic resistance struggle by addressing the role of the youth in spreading Islam: “Islam was so dear that the Prophet’s children gave their lives to it. Hazrat Imam Hosein, the Master of Martyrs, those children and youth and, with such companions, fought for Islam, sacrificed their lives but revived Islam.”⁵⁵ Thus, tracing the role of the youth back to the history of Islam was in itself a way of legitimizing resistance to the Pahlavi rule in order to advance the idea of Islamic government. In addition, Khomeini refrained from criticizing the youth for their inaction. In contrast to his addresses to the Iranian *ulema*, Khomeini equally encouraged and praised the revolutionary activities of the youth inside and outside Iran. Khomeini’s rather positive attitude towards the youth is reflected in the letters he wrote to the Iranian Muslim students in North America and Europe: “It is your duty, respected youths of Islam. You are the source of hope for the Muslims, to awaken people, to expose the sinister and destructive designs of imperialism. Strive harder for the propagation of Islam.”⁵⁶ As revolution was for Khomeini a means of re-establishing Islamic rule of law in Iran, support from the Iranian youth was necessary in the struggle against the Shah and foreign domination. Indeed, Iranian students played an important role in the mobilization of Iranians towards resistance to the Pahlavi monarchy and imperialism throughout the 1970s. The students’ endorsement of Khomeini’s revolution led them to orchestrate the U.S. embassy hostage-taking of 1979. This event in particular was seen by Khomeini and the revolutionary clergy as an act of resistance that was entirely consistent with the post-revolutionary political direction of the country.

Student Followers of the Line of the Imam

The United States entered into a direct confrontation with the Islamic Republic after the Iran hostage crisis, in which fifty-two American nationals were taken hostage in their embassy offices in Tehran by Iranian students on 4 November 1979.⁵⁷ The Iranian students who carried out the hostage-taking considered themselves to be following the line of the Imam. In Iran, advocates of Khomeini’s Islamic programme understood that the Islamic revolution had to be exported. The 1979 diplomatic crisis, which lasted for 444 days, was an important factor in consolidating the revolutionary image of Islamic Iran. For Khomeini, the takeover of the U.S. embassy in Tehran set an example of resistance to foreign influence. On the incident, he commented: “What is important is the value of these actions, is that they have taken out fear from the minds of the weak and the oppressed across the world. They have become people of distinction. ... Our youth have risen and they took over the American embassy and detained more than fifty spies.”⁵⁸ Khomeini believed that supporting the students would guarantee

the consolidation of the revolutionary Islamic government⁵⁹ and that the hostage crisis would serve the purpose of exporting the revolution.⁶⁰ In turn, Khomeini's approval of the students' action exposed his strategic disposition: his endorsement was consistent with his message of resistance against the United States by showing that political action against the superpower would be taken under the new regime. Thus, the 1979 hostage crisis in Iran was in line with the radical non-aligned position of the Islamic Republic and its constitutional battle against foreign – particularly U.S. and Soviet – interference. With the hostage crisis, “the rhetoric about the struggle of the ‘oppressed’ against the ‘arrogant powers’ soon broke the boundaries between political idiom and political action,”⁶¹ which was congruent with Khomeini's line of thought and the new image of post-revolutionary Iran.

Massoumeh Ebtekar, a young student at the time who participated in the hostage-taking, contends that the actions of the students reflected general discontent with the social, political and cultural transformation of the country under the Pahlavi regime. Her generation's experience, she argues, was that of “stripping the country of its religious and cultural heritage.”⁶² Instead of fully embracing the secular, modernizing reforms, many Iranians had actually reacted negatively to them.⁶³ Ebtekar explains:

Like most Iranians perhaps, we felt that we could tolerate almost anything. But the humiliation we increasingly felt at the hands of the shah and of the Americans became more than we could bear. If you are a practicing Muslim, you believe in the religion as taught by the Prophet, the authentic spirit of Islam: that no human being can submit to anyone other than God. Any submission [to any other human being] is degrading to human dignity, and for that reason is [neither] permitted nor acceptable in Islam. That was one of the spiritual convictions that turned people against the shah and his regime.⁶⁴

This excerpt of Ebtekar's memoirs perhaps best encapsulates the student's claim of adopting the line of the Imam by taking action against the U.S. embassy. Ebtekar argues that the students who participated in the occupation of the U.S. embassy in Tehran “did so in their conviction that their action was in line with the Imam's policy.”⁶⁵ Khomeini's rejection of the Pahlavi monarchy's rule was mainly due to the belief that the Shah's reforms and ties with the United States increasingly obscured the influence of Islam in the society. Indeed, Khomeini preached the restoration of Islamic values and culture all throughout the revolutionary struggle in Iran, which appealed to students such as Ebtekar. The history of foreign influence in Iranian affairs during the Pahlavi era was a great force behind the revolution, which brought different sections of Iranian society together against the Shah. According to Ebtekar, the CIA-backed coup that overthrew Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh in 1953 “had dashed all hopes of establishing an independent democratic system” in Iran.⁶⁶ For the students, the Islamic revolution had unleashed a new political trend that could finally secure an independent Iran:

A strong sense of devotion and love for the values of the revolution, and for Iran as the homeland of a free people, filled our minds and hearts. Our reading of our own history told us that we had to act quickly. The stubborn and bullying attitude of the American government as it confronted the Islamic Revolution made it clear that we had a few alternatives left to consider.⁶⁷

As said by the students, some of whom later occupied high-ranking positions in the Islamic government, the takeover of the American embassy in Tehran represented the re-emergence of an

Iran free from foreign intervention. Moreover, their self-designated title of Students Following the Line of the Imam served as evidence that their political message was that of restoring and protecting Islamic values in Iran.⁶⁸ As Khomeini had become the emblematic figure of the Islamic revolution, the Iranian students' message of resistance against foreign interference based on Islamic principles is regarded as one that resonates best with the core ideals of the Islamic revolution in Iran.

khomeini's party-line: the revolutionary iranian Ulema

The Iranian *ulema* that supported Khomeini rejected all forms of foreign influence in the country. Morteza Mutahhari, a student of Khomeini's on '*irfan* (Islamic gnosis), opposed the adoption of foreign political ideologies. Mutahhari rejected the use of historical materialism for the interpretation of Islamic textual references.⁶⁹ He also criticized revolutionary movements such as the Mujahedin-e Khalq for "the use of Marxist methodology" in their reading of Islam.⁷⁰ For him, the revival of Islamic gnosis was the weapon to confront the influence of the West on the Muslim way of thinking.⁷¹ Likewise, Mahmud Taleqani, another prominent cleric of the pre-revolutionary era, was devoted to confronting "marxism on ideological and material levels."⁷² Like Khomeini, Taleqani was opposed to political quietism among the Iranian clergy and favoured their involvement in political, economic, cultural and religious matters of the community.⁷³

Mutahhari was an advocate of the leadership of the *ulema* and their authority in the political affairs of the country, and is considered one of the masterminds of the development of the theory of *velayat-e faqih* in Iran. Taleqani also sustained that the role of the *fuqaha* should transcend social and religious matters, and argued that besides their spiritual role, human beings should engage in *jihad* as a defence strategy against the absence of Islamic rule of law. According to Taleqani, the Islamic way of life had vanished due to the modernist reforms of the Pahlavi regime.⁷⁴ Taleqani was active in campaigning against the Pahlavi government, especially during the 1963 uprisings at the Feyziyah Madrasa that led to Khomeini's arrest.⁷⁵ Similarly, Ayatollah Mohammad Beheshti, another figure of the pre-revolutionary period, believed in the imperative of the *ulema's* political authority. He argued that the revolution should advance towards a government ruled by Islamic teachings, as this would reflect the will of the people.⁷⁶

Mutahhari's assassination in 1979 prevented his involvement in the application of *velayat-e faqih*. Taleqani also died in September 1979. Beheshti participated in the formation of the Islamic Republic's Assembly of Experts as well as the drafting of the new constitution, and served as head of the judiciary. He was, however, assassinated in 1981 along with nearly 100 members of the Islamic Republican Party.⁷⁷ A friend of Mutahhari's and also a student of Khomeini, Ayatollah Hussein Ali Montazeri was a prominent figure during the formation of the Islamic state. Montazeri was active in campaigning for the establishment of an Islamic government and the empowerment of the *ulema*, as "the qualifications of an Islamic ruler were naturally found in a just *faqih* with excellent intellectual capacity and management skills."⁷⁸ He was strongly opposed to foreign intervention,⁷⁹ and considered Zionism to be a representation of the superpower's project to dominate the region. Montazeri played an important role in calling for mass protests against the Shah,⁸⁰ and was arrested several times by the Shah's security forces. He later helped to disseminate Khomeini's statements after his exile from Iran in 1963. Montazeri was a key player in designing the constitution of the new government under *velayat-e faqih*, and believed that only the *ulema* could ensure the establishment of proper Islamic institutions.⁸¹ However, Montazeri was critical of the absolute rule of the *vali* or

designated *marja-e taqlid*,⁸² but nevertheless remained close to Khomeini throughout the 1980s. Montazeri was initially appointed as Khomeini's successor, but was later dismissed,⁸³ mainly due to his reservations on the "supreme leadership" of the *vali*.

With the Iraqi invasion of Iran in 1980, Khomeini and his followers viewed Saddam Hussein's aggression as a plan to weaken the newly established Islamic Republic. An essential reason behind Iraq's war with Iran was the former's perception that "Khomeini's legions were working to spread the revolution across the Islamic world."⁸⁴ Hence, it is argued that the "destruction of the revolutionary regime became a pillar of Iraq's strategy" during the war.⁸⁵ It is further argued that Iran's Islamic ideological agenda and its policy of exporting the revolution were the most crucial justification for the Iraqi invasion of Iran,⁸⁶ which was mainly directed at crushing the Islamic revolution's "transnational appeal"; turning the confrontation into a "legitimacy contest."⁸⁷

Montazeri's approach to the war focused on resistance to imperialism. He called for the spread of the revolution across the Muslim world, and believed that Saddam's aggression towards the Islamic Republic was due to Iran's policy of exporting the revolution:

The Iranian revolution began to spread in neighbouring countries also so the interests of American imperialism in particular have been endangered. They attempted to act against us several times. ... When their plans failed, they incited the Iraqi government against us because they knew the Iraqis are opposed to the Iranian revolution.⁸⁸
[...]

Saddam's sin is not only the act of imposing a war against Iran and being an agent of colonialism. The goal of the Ba'ath party, from the day it came to power in Iraq, has been to destroy Islam and the Muslims.⁸⁹

Ali Khamenei's discourse was similar to Montazeri's. His appointment as president of the Islamic Republic in 1981 was a turning point in the application of *velayat-e faqih*, increasing the authority of the *ulema* in administrative affairs and ending initial plans of establishing civilian administrative authority within the government. Like Khomeini and Montazeri, Khamenei viewed Iraq's hostility towards the Islamic Republic, and that of other countries in the region – such as Egypt – as part of U.S. efforts to crush the Islamic revolutionary government:

We express our hatred for as-Sadat and for all mercenaries of the region who are plotting against our revolution, who are inciting against our revolution, in favour of imperialism ... and for all those groups who are not following the line of the imam but are treading the path of imperialism. We will try through our cultural revolution to eradicate all these traces of imperialist culture of the former regime.⁹⁰

During the war, Khamenei also continued to resist American influence in Iran. His attitude vis-à-vis the United States aimed at strengthening the Islamic Republic's position against foreign intervention. Khamenei's and Montazeri's statements throughout the 1980s indicate how independence from the United States was central in the general political direction taken by the Islamic Republic during its first decade:

Today the world of blasphemy and dictatorship (US and USSR) helplessly confesses that it takes

a serious view of the power of Islam and it feels quite threatened by the vigilance and awareness of the nations spreading in every corner of the world after the victory of the Iranian Islamic Revolution. They are hatching plots to destroy our Islamic revolution and most of their conspiracies will be against Islam, the clergy and the revolutionary organs.⁹¹

[...]

Our revolution had and has no other aim but to return dignity among Muslims once again and to put the enemies and oppressors in their place. ... Our revolution took place with these great dimensions and thus the Iraqi regime imposed this war seeking to overthrow the Islamic Republic and the Islamic Revolution. Our resistance and the exertion of severe pressures on the enemy preserved the revolution and became a great lesson in history for the nations of the future.⁹²

We thus find in the permanence of revolutionary rhetoric throughout the 1980s a key dimension to the Islamic Republic's approach to politics. Both Montazeri and Khomeini, and others close to Khomeini such as Ali-Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani, stressed the importance of Islamic governance and way of life in order to ensure the survival of the Islamic Republic through the "continuation of the Islamic revolution." This line of thought can be easily traced in their statements during the 1980s:

We believe that Islam is to the benefit of mankind. If it were not hindered, Islam would arrive of its own accord. We do not want to conquer a single country but we believe that Islam is a light that shines all over the region.⁹³

[...]

The creation of the Islamic Republic was the first mountain peak and the next peak is the preservation of the Islamic order and the preservation of its existence.⁹⁴

[...]

As the government is Islamic, people are with it, and the Islamic beliefs of the people are the most important factors strengthening the revolution. The victory of the revolution was achieved under the shadow of its Islamic slogans.⁹⁵

Hence, the aim of the influential clergy during the Khomeini era was the propagation of the Islamic revolutionary movement across borders. For them, the success of the 1979 Iranian revolution lay in the revival of Islam as a political force that defied geographical boundaries. After the establishment of the Islamic Republic, the revolutionary stance of the clerics was solidified in order to confront Iraqi aggression, which was viewed by Khomeini and his followers as a direct attack on the Islamic character of the new Iranian government. The Persian Gulf War was subsequently portrayed by the revolutionary *ulema* as a plot by Saddam Hussein and Western powers to weaken and destroy the Islamic Republic. The political role of the *ulema* during the formative years of the Islamic Republic therefore demonstrated commitment to the enforcement of Islamic governance in Iran, and to the development of a foreign policy based on the resistance to imperialism.

Khatt-e Imam outside iran: the case of hizbullah

The impact of the Islamic revolution outside Iran is perhaps most easily observed in its participation in the emergence of Islamic resistance groups. After the revolution in Iran, the Islamic Republic consolidated and clearly defined strategies for resistance that – along with Khomeini's

weltanschauung – were “imported” widely by Islamic resistance groups elsewhere. This section is aimed at displaying the ideological connection between the Lebanese Hizbullah’s approach to Islamic resistance and Khomeini’s Islamic thought.

Hizbullah emerged shortly after the Israeli invasion of southern Lebanon in 1982. It is a Lebanese political party, as well as Shi’i paramilitary group specialized in guerrilla warfare. Although Hizbullah has not advanced the establishment of an Islamic government in Lebanon, there is an organic relationship between Khomeini’s political thought and Hizbullah’s ideology. The formation of Hizbullah has been regarded as the best illustration of how Iran’s Islamic revolution has been exported elsewhere. As such, Hizbullah represents the physical epicentre of the Islamic Republic’s regional policy because of Hizbullah’s endorsement of Khomeini’s line and its historical relationship with Israel and the Palestinian liberation cause. It is for these reasons that Hizbullah is also regarded as one of the most important non-state allies of the Islamic Republic.

One factor that determines the political and ideological relationship between Iran and Hizbullah is the early support that the Islamic Republic under Khomeini provided at its inception as a Lebanese resistance movement, and the financial and military assistance that it continues to receive after Khomeini’s death. From the perspective of Hizbullah’s Deputy Secretary General Naim Qassem, this support has benefited not just Hizbullah but Lebanon as a whole, in that “it is in harmony with Iran’s conviction of Hizbullah’s soundness of path, right in *jihad* and resistance, and Lebanon’s right to claim its lost land (which is also the Palestinians’ right).”⁹⁶ In fact, Hizbullah’s 1985 “Open Letter,” which outlined the group’s principles and objectives, explicitly states that they “obey the orders of one leader, wise and just, that of our tutor and *faqih* (jurist) who fulfils all the necessary conditions: Ruhollah Musawi Khomeini.”⁹⁷

The principles of Hizbullah’s mission are thus highly influenced by the teachings of and the political movement developed by Khomeini.⁹⁸ In their own words:

We declare openly and loudly that we are an *umma* which fears God only and is by no means ready to tolerate injustice, aggression and humiliation. America, its Atlantic Pact allies, and the Zionist entity in the holy land of Palestine, attacked us and continue to do so without respite. This is why we are in a state of permanent alert in order to repel aggression and defend our religion, our existence, our dignity.⁹⁹

Hizbullah’s construction of oppression and the *mustaddafan* (oppressed) versus the *mustakbaran* (oppressors) struggle emanate from the Israeli occupation of the predominantly Shi’i-populated Lebanese South,¹⁰⁰ and the history of economic, social and political marginalization experienced by the Shi’i of South Lebanon. Hizbullah’s image of the Shi’i as the ultimate representation of an oppressed community originates from “the Israeli occupation of South Lebanon and the cultural division of labour typifying Lebanese society, whereby class and community overlap. ... [T]he Shi’ites constituted a ‘community-class’ by dint of their low educational, occupational and economic status.”¹⁰¹ Further to this, Saad-Ghorayeb explains:

Economic deprivation and exploitation are not the only criteria of oppression, as attested to by Khomeini’s and Hizbullah’s significant middle-class support base. The incorporation of all social classes into the oppressed category is based on the Qur’anic portrayal of the oppressed as those who economically, politically and culturally “weak” vis-à-vis the “arrogant” oppressor, a bifurcation which is enshrined in the constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran.¹⁰²

Hence, Hizbullah's espousal of the oppressor-versus-oppressed categorization of the world as their defining worldview has been directly borrowed from Khomeini's ideology of resistance. Just as Khomeini had inferred in numerous references to the "oppressed peoples of the world," Hizbullah officials believe that "neither weakness nor arrogance is intrinsic to any religious community,"¹⁰³ and that "not only all social classes represent the oppressed, but all religious denominations too."¹⁰⁴ For Hizbullah, oppression is not merely a primary factor in their struggle – it represents their very *raison d'être*. In the case of Hizbullah, this resistance discourse came to be perceived as an ideological source of power that was evinced by the growth of the group after the withdrawal of the Israeli army from southern Lebanon in 2000. The characteristic continuity of the Islamic resistance movement in Lebanon is therefore inspired by Khomeini's construction of revolution and his foreign policy of exporting the revolution. This is also reflected in Hizbullah's current political agenda. Hizbullah's commitment to follow the line of the Imam is marked by the group's determination to hold on to its arms after the end of Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon and continue to adopt the position of resistance even as a political party in Lebanon.

Conclusion

The success of the revolution in 1979 gave birth to a new Islamicized political identity and culture in Iran. Khomeini's Islamic political thought and persona was consecrated, turning him into the symbol of the Islamic revolution. The Iranian post-revolutionary *zeitgeist* became embodied by different actors of the Iranian political scene: the Iranian Muslim students, politically active Iranian clergy and resistance groups abroad, such as Hizbullah. These actors came to be known as the followers of Khomeini's line or *khatt-e imam*. The political trend of the post-1979 era was subsequently characterized by a sense of excitement brought about by the end of monarchical rule, and the promise of freedom, independence and the return to the "true Islamic essence." This is reflected in the discourse and actions of Khomeini's followers. The Iranian students' takeover of the U.S. embassy symbolized the course that the Islamic Republic's foreign policy was to maintain until the death of Khomeini in 1989. The students who participated in the hostage crisis claimed that their actions were in line with Khomeini's revolutionary vision, justifying their takeover of the embassy as a way of reclaiming Iran's independence by rejecting foreign interference and returning to the core values of Islam.

The revolutionary *ulema* also engaged in the struggle to bring the influence of the United States and its allies in Iran to an end, and for the re-establishment of Islamic rule of law. Many of them actively took part in the formation of the judicial, administrative and military bodies of the Islamic Republic. In addition, the Iranian *ulema* following Khomeini also believed that Iran's revolutionary Islam had to be exported across borders. For them, the Islamic revolution and the Islamic Republic set an example for all oppressed peoples, as only a return to Islam and resistance to imperialism could put an end to injustice. These ideas were also adopted by groups outside Iran. The Lebanese paramilitary Hizbullah claims to follow the footsteps of Khomeini. Hizbullah rejects foreign influence in all its forms, but does not actively pursue the formation of a government in Lebanon modelled after the Islamic Republic. Rather, their ideological principles are in line with Khomeini's ideas of resistance and revolution: they believe in ending oppression by Islamic resistance. As such, Hizbullah continues its armed struggle against Israel, even after the liberation of the south in 2000.

[1](#) Ruhollah Khomeini, “Interview with Hamid Algar,” in Hamid Algar (ed., trans.), *Islam and Revolution: Imam Khomeini, Writings and Declarations* (London: Mizan Press, 1981), p. 327.

[2](#) *Ibid.*, p. 327.

[3](#) Ruhollah Khomeini, *Sayings of the Ayatollah Khomeini: Political, Philosophical, Social and Religious* (New York: Bantam Books, 1980), p. 3.

[4](#) Moojan Momen, *An Introduction to Shi’i Islam: The History and Doctrines of Twelver Shi’ism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), p. 11.

[5](#) *Ibid.*, p. 11.

[6](#) *Ibid.*, p. 10.

[7](#) *Ibid.*, p. 19.

[8](#) *Ibid.*, pp. 19–20.

[9](#) *Ibid.*, 24.

[10](#) Heinz Halm, *Shi’a Islam: From Religion to Revolution* (Princeton, NJ: Markus Wiener Publishers, 1997), p. 6. See also Momen, *Introduction to Shi’i Islam*, p. 25.

- [11](#) Halm, *Shi'a Islam*, p. 6.
- [12](#) Momen, *Introduction to Shi'a Islam*, p. 25.
- [13](#) Ruhollah Khomeini, *Imam Khomeini's Will* (Tehran: The Institute for Compilation and Publication of Imam Khomeini's Works, 1989), p. 1.
- [14](#) B. Scarcia Amoretti, "Mazlum", *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Second Edition. Brill Online, 2012. Retrieved from www.paulyonline.brill.nl/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/mazlum-SIM_5096. Accessed October 30, 2012.
- [15](#) *Ibid.*
- [16](#) See Momen, *Introduction to Shi'i Islam*, pp. 26–28; Halm, *Shi'a Islam*, pp. 6–8.
- [17](#) Momen, *Introduction to Shi'i Islam*, p. 28.
- [18](#) *Ibid.*, p. 29.
- [19](#) *Ibid.*, p. 29.
- [20](#) *Ibid.*, p. 30.

[21](#) 'Ashura refers to the tenth day of the month of Muharram in the Islamic calendar, on which day al-Husayn and his supporters were massacred during what is known as “the Battle of Karbala”. The root *ashara* means “tenth” in Arabic; thus, 'ashura may be translated as “the tenth day”.

[22](#) Amoretti, “Mazlum”. Retrieved from www.paulyonline.brill.nl/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/mazlum-SIM_5096. Accessed October 30, 2012.

[23](#) Nader Ahmadi and Fereshteh Ahmadi, *Iranian Islam: The Concept of the Individual* (London: MacMillan Press, 1998), p. 168.

[24](#) *Ibid.*, p. 169.

[25](#) Fedaiyan-e Khalq (Devotees of the People) was a Marxist guerrilla group that confronted both the monarchy and the Islamic regime, and “had as one of its central principles the idea of sacrificing one’s own life for the sake of the masses”. See Ahmadi, *Iranian Islam*, p. 170.

[26](#) Khomeini, *Khomeini’s Will*, p. 8.

[27](#) Ruhollah Khomeini, “Statement” in Hamid Ansari (ed.), *The Narrative of Awakening* (Tehran: The Institute for Compilation and Publication of Imam Khomeini’s Works), p. 259.

[28](#) Khomeini, *Khomeini’s Will*, p. 43.

[29](#) *Ibid.*, p. 1.

[30](#) Nader Ahmadi, *Iranian Islam*, p. 142.

[31](#) *Ibid.*, p. 144.

[32](#) Rula Jurdi Abisaab, *Converting Persia: Religion and Power in the Safavid Empire* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2004), p. 7.

[33](#) *Ibid.*, 8.

[34](#) B. S. Amoretti, “Religion in the Timurid and Safavid Periods” in Peter Jackson et. al (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), vol. vi, pp. 634–635.

Nader Ahmadi, *Iranian Islam*, p. 152.

[35](#) *Ibid.*, p. 152.

[36](#) Abisaab, *Converting Persia*, pp. 8–9.

[37](#) See Momen, *Introduction to Shi’i Islam*, pp. 161–171; and Jassim M. Hussain, *The Occultation of the Twelfth Imam: A Historical Background* (London: The Muhammadi Trust, 1982).

[38](#) Ruhollah Khomeini, *Tahrir al-vasilah* (Tehran: The Institute for Compilation and Publication of the Works of Imam Khomeini, 1964), p. 1. Khomeini wrote *Tahrir al-vasilah* between 1964 and 1965 during his exile in Turkey. The first chapter of this book is a detailed elucidation of the characteristics and obligations of the *’alim* or *mujtahid*.

[39](#) See Vanessa Martin, *Islam and Modernism: The Iranian Revolution of 1906* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1989).

[40](#) Nader Ahmadi, *Iranian Islam*, p. 158.

[41](#) Hamid Algar, “Religious Forces in Twentieth-Century Iran”, in Peter Avery et. al (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Iran*, vol. vii (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 732.

[42](#) *Ibid.*, p. 735.

[43](#) Nader Ahmadi, *Iranian Islam*, p. 159.

[44](#) *Ibid.*, p. 159.

[45](#) Algar, “Religious Forces in Twentieth-Century Iran”, p. 735.

[46](#) Nikki Keddie, *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), pp. 89–90.

[47](#) *Kashaf al-asrar* (“The Unveiling of Secrets”) was essentially a “bitter attack on the policies of the [Pahlavi regime]”. See Algar, “Religious Forces in Twentieth-Century Iran”, p. 752.

[48](#) Algar, “Religious Forces in Twentieth-Century Iran”, p. 752.

[49](#) Khomeini, *Kashaf al-asrar*, pp. 179–180.

[50](#) Khomeini, “Hukumat-i Islami” pp. 69–70.

[51](#) Ruhollah Khomeini, “Statements about Muharram and ’Ashura, 1969”, in *The Ashura Uprising in the Words and Messages of Imam Khomeini* (Tehran: The Institute for the Compilation and Publication of Imam Khomeini’s Works, 1995), p. 7.

[52](#) Ruhollah Khomeini, “The Meaning of Cultural Revolution: Address to Iranian Students in Tehran, April 26, 1980”, in Hamid Algar (ed., trans.), *Islam and Revolution* (London: Mizan Press, 1981), p. 297.

[53](#) *Ibid.*, p. 298.

[54](#) *Ibid.*, p. 298.

[55](#) Ruhollah Khomeini, *The Ashura Uprising in the Words and Messages of Imam Khomeini* (Tehran: The Institute for Compilation and Publication of Imam Khomeini’s Works, 1995), p. 44.

[56](#) Ruhollah Khomeini, “Message to the Muslim Students in North America, July 10, 1972”, in Algar (ed., trans.), *Islam and Revolution: Imam Khomeini, Writings and Declarations*, (London: Mizan Press, 1981), p. 210.

[57](#) Daniel E. Harmon, *Spiritual Leaders and Thinkers: Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini* (Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 2005), p. 61.

[58](#) Ruhollah Khomeini “Ayatollah Khomeini on the U.S. Hostage Crisis”, YouTube video, 4:21, from a speech in 1979, February 24, 2011, retrieved from www.youtube.com/watch?v=jucWz5tf3mY.

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[61](#) Arshin Adib-Moghaddam, *The International Politics of the Persian Gulf: A Cultural Genealogy* (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 26.

[62](#) Massoumeh Ebtekar, *Takeover in Tehran: The Inside Story of the 1979 U.S. Embassy Capture* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 2000), p. 41.

[63](#) *Ibid.*, p. 41.

[64](#) *Ibid.*, pp. 41–42.

[65](#) *Ibid.*, p. 44.

[66](#) *Ibid.*, p. 52.

[67 Ibid.](#), p. 52.

[68 Ibid.](#), p. 62.

[69](#) Mahmood T. Davari, *The Political Thought of Ayatollah Murtaza Muttahari: An Iranian Theoretician of the Islamic State* (London: Routledge Curzon, 2005), p. 74.

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[73 Ibid.](#), pp. 231–232.

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[75](#) Dabashi, *Theology of Discontent*, p. 235.

[76](#) Mohammad Beheshti, “Ayatollah Dr. Beheshti on Islamic Government”, YouTube video, 1:34, December 5, 2011, retrieved from www.youtube.com/watch?v=N69Wd34HPzA.

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[78](#) Geneive Abdo and Hossein Ali Montazeri, “Re-Thinking the Islamic Republic: A Conversation with Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri”, *Middle East Journal*, vol. 55, no. 1 (2001), p. 15.

[79](#) *Ibid.*, p. 16.

[80](#) *Ibid.*, p. 12.

[81](#) See Hossein Ali Montazeri, *Dirasat fi wilayat al-faqih wa fiqh al-dawlah al-islamiyah*, vol. ii (Beirut: al-dar al-islamiyah, 1988), p. 421.

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[83](#) M. Mahmood, *The Political System of the Islamic Republic of Iran* (Delhi: Kalpaz Publications, 2006), p. 26.

[84](#) Harmon, *Spiritual Leaders*, p. 64.

[85](#) Farhang Rajaee, “Introduction”, in Farhang Rajaee (ed.), *The Iran-Iraq War: The Politics of Aggression* (University Press of Florida, 1993), p. 3.

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[93](#) Hossein Ali Montazeri, “Interview with Hungarian Press, November 17, 1980”, *FBIS Daily Reports*.

[94](#) Ali Khamenei, “Statement during the Commemoration of the 1978 Qom Uprising – January 9, 1988”, Tehran Domestic Service, *FBIS Daily Reports*.

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99 Hizbullah, “Open Letter”.

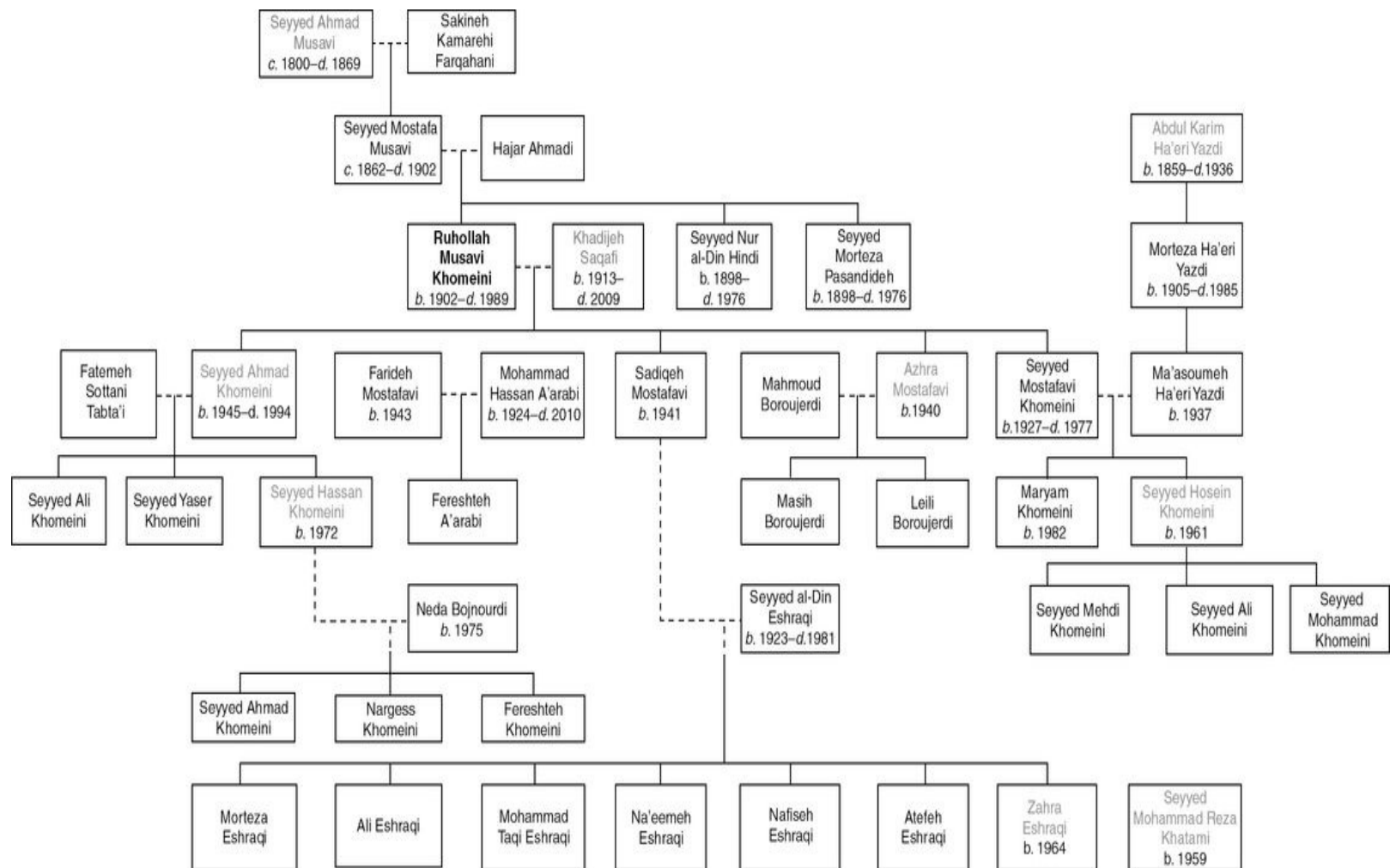
100 Saad-Ghorayeb, *Hizbullah: Politics and Religion*, p. 18.

101 [Ibid.](#), p. 18.

102 [Ibid.](#), p. 19.

103 [Ibid.](#), p. 19.

104 [Ibid.](#), p. 19.



1. Ayatollah Ruhollah Musawi Khomeini's family tree.



2. Khomeini in his early years.



3. Khomeini in the holy city of Najaf, Iraq.



4. Khomeini while exiled in France.



5. Anti-Shah demonstrators march near a shopping district in Tehran on December 27, 1978.



6. Mass demonstrations against the Shah's regime.



7. A man tends to the wounded after the Shah's security forces open fire on protesters.



8. Demonstrators stand off against the Shah's security forces.



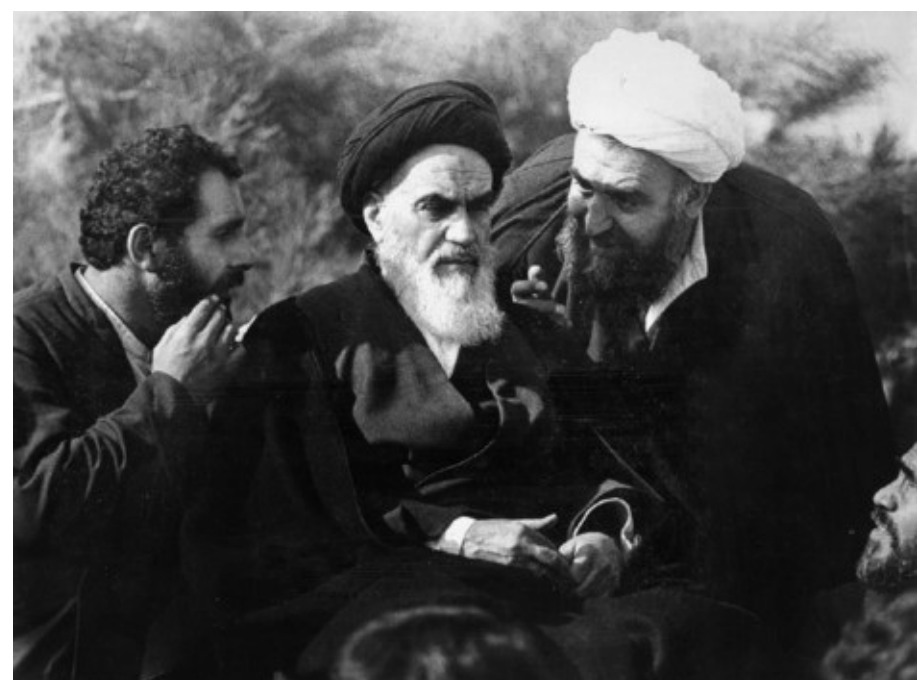
9. A wounded man is carried.



10. Ayatollah Khomeini returns to Iran after 14 years of exile on February 1, 1979. Among those accompanying him are Sadeq Tabataba'i, Hassan Lahouti Eshkevary, Ayatollah Morteza Motahhari, and Ahmad Khomeini.



11. Khomeini heads immediately to Behesht Zahra cemetery upon arriving in Tehran on February 1, 1979, after his exile.



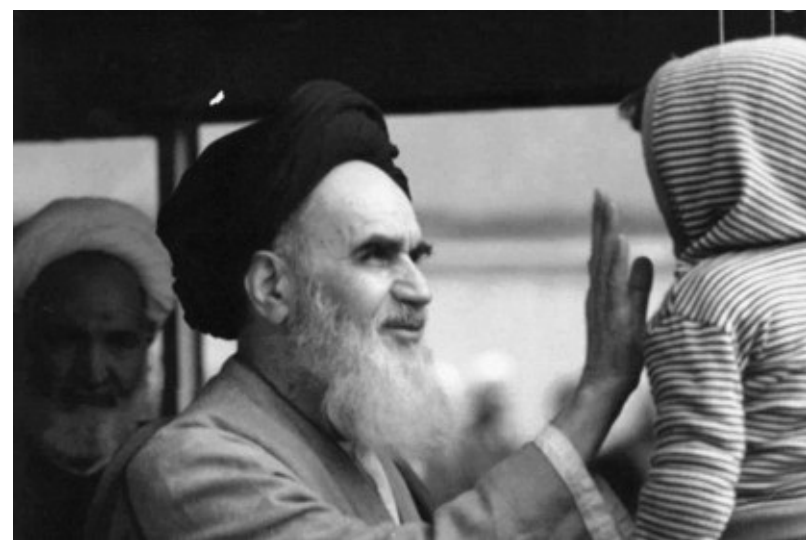
12. Khomeini preparing to give a speech.



13. Khomeini gives a speech at Behesht Zahra cemetery on February 1, 1979.



14. Khomeini gives a speech at Behesht Zahra cemetery on February 1, 1979.



15. Khomeini greets a young child at the Refah School in Tehran, 1979.



16. Poster of Khomeini in Iraq.



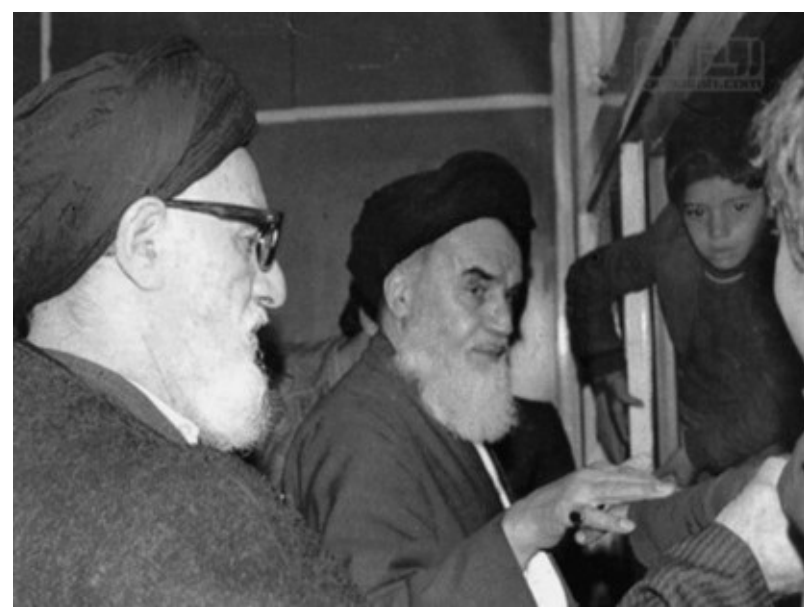
17. Khomeini with his grandchildren.



18. Ali Khamenei, who would later become Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic, with Khomeini.



19. (From right to left) Family members Ahmad Khomeini, Yaser Khomeini, and Hassan Khomeini sit with the Ayatollah in Paris, France.



20. Khomeini with Ayatollah Mahmoud Taleghani.



21. Khomeini pouring tea.



22. Khomeini casting vote.



23. Mourners surround the body of Khomeini at his funeral at Behesht Zahra cemetery on June 3, 1989.

6 Khomeini and the West

Mehran Kamrava

One of the most salient aspects of Ayatollah Khomeini's thoughts and revolutionary discourse was his view of the West. Within the context that he articulated these ideas, Khomeini's position toward the generic West – *gharb* – did not represent a radical departure from the standard position of the Iranian left toward what was commonly perceived as a source of neocolonial domination. Similarly, Khomeini did not necessarily offer a starkly unique interpretation of what position the West occupied in relation to Iran and the rest of the Third World. But Khomeini's position and pronouncements toward the West were undoubtedly one of the most central elements – if not the central element – in his revolutionary discourse that catapulted his views to dominance within Iran's revolutionary movement of the late 1970s. In essence, Ayatollah Khomeini was the right person at the right time, who said the right things as a haphazard political movement to oppose the Pahlavi regime began to coalesce into a revolution.

That the Ayatollah had from the very beginning been consistent in his stances on a number of fundamental political issues only enhanced his credibility and revolutionary credentials in the eyes of his growing throngs of supporters. As the snowballing revolution smashed away the pillars of the old regime, and Khomeini found himself leading the revolutionary tidal wave both before and especially after the formal collapse of the Pahlavi dynasty, his steadfast opposition to what the West had come to symbolize helped consolidate his revolutionary leadership and command of the faithful. For more than a decade after the revolution of 1979, Khomeini politically operationalized his conceptions of the West; using it to fend off enemies near and far, real and imagined, as they encroached on and sought to undermine his revolutionary project. Until his death on June 3 1989, the West, as both a philosophical concept and an actual entity which interacted with Iran, remained elemental to the Ayatollah's thoughts, discourse and politics.

This chapter explores Khomeini's conception of and operationalization of the West. It begins by placing his thoughts within the broader context of the era within which they were formulated, looking specifically at the nuances and changes on the one hand and the consistencies in the Ayatollah's thoughts and discourse on the other hand. The chapter argues that regarding the West, several interrelated themes can be teased out of Khomeini's thoughts; the most notable of which include the importance of "authenticity" and independence from the West; what the West actually is and how it has spread its tentacles across the world; and what it has done to the Muslim world in general, and to Iran in particular.

In the end, I maintain that despite his almost constant condemnation of the West and all that it represented, Ayatollah Khomeini left behind a mixed legacy of Iran's relations with and its position vis-à-vis the West. He bitterly condemned all that the colonial West had done to Iran and other Muslim lands. He decried its political machinations, rapacious economic exploitation, overt and creeping cultural intrusions and perhaps most saliently, its utter disregard for the dignity and independence of Iranians and other Muslims. But in the last decade of his life, Khomeini was also a political leader who presided over a country locked in a bloody war with an intractable enemy on its Western border, and an economy whose structural dependence on the West could not be overcome by revolutionary

zeal and slogans alone; needing materials and resources from the very West so roundly condemned by the revolution's foot soldiers and grand patriarch. What ensued was ultimately a mixed legacy of bitter philosophical condemnation on the one hand and pragmatic – although by necessity, rare – cooperation on the other hand. That conflicted legacy, a product of the founder of the Islamic Republic's own unresolved stance toward the West, continues to characterize Iran's tormented relationship with the West today.

In reconstructing Ayatollah Khomeini's views toward the West, mention must be made of the different formats in which his discourse and views were articulated and expressed over the years. Khomeini's body of work – sizeable by any standard – can be broadly classified into those more concerned with Islamic sciences and philosophy and those that are more pointedly political. Both categories of works appeared in a variety of forms ranging from monographs and books to speeches and declarations that were recorded and then distributed to seminary lessons.¹ Altogether, at least forty-two books and monographs, mostly dealing with Islamic sciences and philosophy, plus a book of poetry in Arabic and one in Farsi, are attributed to Ayatollah Khomeini.

In the years following the revolution, in addition to the reprinting of his older publications, which made his work widely available, much of Khomeini's discourse was formulated and expressed through the speeches and declarations he made in his capacity as the revolution's leader. Many of these speeches were in response to specific developments and particular events, more often representing reactions to emerging circumstances and opportunities rather than coherently thought-out theoretical frameworks and philosophical expositions. In the years following his death, officially sanctioned research institutions have collected, edited and published collections of Khomeini's writings and speeches in multivolume sets that are commonly accepted as definitive sources of his ideas. In the pages to come, and in addition to more specialized books that present Khomeini's views on specific topics, I rely extensively on one of these multivolume sets – *Sahifeh-ye Imam (Imam's Book)* – to construct my arguments.²

The Context of Khomeini's Thoughts

One of the most striking features of Khomeini's thoughts is the assumption of the intimately political nature of Islam. From early on in his career, Khomeini sought to politicize religion and reinvigorate political activism on the part of the clergy. Articulated at a time when a pervasive sense of political quietism characterized Iranian Shi'i thought in the late 1950s and early 1960s, Khomeini's calls for the re-politicization of Islam and its concomitant radicalization were a sharp departure from the prevailing orthodoxy of the time. The young cleric saw religion's de-politicization as a “grave danger” for Islam and Iran.³ Calls for the separation of religion and politics, he argued, were nothing short of an imperialist ploy.⁴ Although there is no evidence to suggest that he risked the ire of the senior clergy at the time, he nonetheless ran the risk of alienating the larger clerical establishment, on whom he relied for continued political and moral support. But Khomeini did not merely buck the trend of quietism. He single-handedly once more made Iranian Shi'ism a potent and uncompromising revolutionary ideology. His positions and pronouncements in the early 1960s were indeed revolutionary; that there were “revolutionaries” of all ideological coloring in Iran both before and after that point, and that the 1978–1979 revolution did not initially start out as an avidly Islamic social movement, should not take away from the significance of Khomeini's early efforts at once again turning Iranian Shi'ism into a political force.

It is only natural that Ayatollah Khomeini's thoughts and positions were influenced by the times and

circumstances in which he and his country found themselves. Iran's predicament during Khomeini's formative years, as well as the conditions in Muslim majority societies and the world at large, were highly influential in shaping the young cleric's thoughts and worldview. In his lifetime, Khomeini witnessed the emergence and evolution of liberalism in the West; the establishment of communism and Leninism and Stalinism in the former Soviet Union; the rise and fall of extremist ideologies such as fascism; the spread of nationalism and pan-Arabism; a bipolar international system and Cold War competition; the growing economic superiority of the United States over the USSR in the 1980s; the emergence of relativism in the social sciences and humanities; postmodernism; and, near the end of his life, growing Islamic activism across the Arab world.⁵ In his journey from adolescence to adulthood – throughout the 1940s into the 1960s – Khomeini saw and at times even directly experienced Iran's domination by foreign powers: first by the Soviets, then by the British, and finally by the United States. Khomeini himself at one point recounts having fought the government's central authority and foreign domination since his early adulthood, learning how to use a gun in his late teens, and from an early age holding foreign powers responsible for most of the country's miseries as he was growing up.⁶ From the very beginning, therefore, the notion of freedom and independence from *ajaneb* – literally, “foreigners,” but the generic label for Western colonizers – was central to Khomeini's way of thinking, discourse and mass appeal.⁷

The scholar Hamid Dabashi maintains that Khomeini was the “philosopher king” who believed that Iranians had been wronged by a collusion of domestic and foreign oppressors.⁸ He divides the development of Khomeini's discourse into eight distinct phases. They include the phase of his serious challenge to the Shah's regime in 1963; from June 1963 to November 1964, when he was exiled; from 1964 to October 1977, when his son Mustafa died under mysterious circumstances; from October 1977 to October 1978, when the revolution reached a high crescendo and Khomeini moved from Iraq to France; from October 1978 to 1 February 1979, when he arrived in Tehran; from 1 February to 11 February 1979, the “ten days of the revolution”; and from February to 1 April 1979, when the Islamic Republic was widely approved in a popular referendum.⁹ Others, including the author Mohammad Hossein Jamshidi, have distinguished the evolution of Ayatollah Khomeini's thoughts into four phases: from the start of his activism in the 1960s until his exile in 1963; the period of exile, lasting from 1964 to 1977; the initial “spark” of the revolution in 1977 until the revolution's success in 1979; and the post-revolutionary period.¹⁰

Although Dabashi's periodization of the Ayatollah's discourse is not necessarily inaccurate, for purposes of the present study Jamshidi's categories more fully capture the evolution of Khomeini's thoughts and activities. In the initial phase, from the 1960s to 1963, Khomeini's primary goal appears to have been the re-politicization of Islam and rebellion not just against the regime but also against the politically quietist spirit that pervaded Iranian Shi'ism at the time. In the second phase, during the difficult years of exile from 1963 to 1977 – partly out of necessity and partly a result of his own growth and evolution as a theologian – Khomeini focused on writing and teaching. Although much of his writings and teachings during this period continued to be imbued with politics (this is when he perfected the notion of *Velayat-e Faqih*, the rule of the supreme jurisconsult), he also contributed much to Shi'i philosophy and theology. It was during this time that Khomeini established himself as a preeminent religious jurist and became a *Marj'a* (source of emulation) for many Shi'i in Iran, Iraq, Lebanon and elsewhere.

During the third phase, from 1977 to 1979, we see the Ayatollah at his revolutionary best; helping fan the flames of the brewing revolution with his vitriolic revolutionary rhetoric and, as the capture of power neared, at times appearing conciliatory in order to assuage the fears of observers near and

far. It was at this point that his earlier condemnation of the West assumed new vigor. As the Shah struggled to save his dying and increasingly unpopular regime, and the United States appeared to rush to his support, Khomeini's rhetoric, with its condemnation of the West and the United States, resonated with more and more Iranians. This condemnation – and what emerged as Khomeini's uncompromising anti-Westernism – only assumed new and more pointed dimensions as the revolution journeyed on, battling one domestic and foreign enemy after another. Context and timing determined much of what Khomeini thought and said about the West and a host of other topics.

However one might characterize Khomeini's career as a thinker and revolutionary, the constancy of certain themes in his thoughts are undeniable. From the beginning, anti-imperialism and opposition to Israel were two of the most salient themes in the Ayatollah's speeches and writings.¹¹ Khomeini had equal scorn for regional leaders as well as the West, often referring to the two as indistinguishable and accusing the former of being little more than puppets of the latter. He was similarly disdainful of the rise of the central state and concomitant erosion of the powers and autonomy of the clergy. Most observers have attributed the start of Khomeini's activism to his opposition to the modernizing tenets of the Shah's so-called White Revolution, which he launched in 1963 to abort the possibility of a mass-based revolution from below. Contrary to popular assumptions, however, Khomeini's opposition to the state at the time was inspired not so much by such principles of the White Revolution as land reform and universal suffrage, but by the increasing intrusion of the central state and its consolidation of power at the expense of the clerical establishment.¹²

As early as 1963, four themes dominated Khomeini's speeches. These included the steady expansion of the penetrative powers of the state in civil and personal matters; associated growth of secularism and erosion of Islam; repressive nature of the state; and pervasive economic and political influences of the United States on the Iranian government.¹³ In 1963, the Ayatollah gave a series of blistering speeches that eventually led to his exile, first to Turkey and then to Iraq.¹⁴ In one of his declarations, Khomeini stated: "The world must know that all difficulties that Iran and the Muslim people have is the work of Westerners and the Americans. Muslims despise Westerners in general and Americans in particular. It is America that supports Israel and the Zionists. It is America that gives Israel the power to bring ruin to the lives of Muslim Arabs."¹⁵ He was similarly emphatic in his famous May 1963 speech:

Our pride has been pummeled. Iran's glory has been destroyed. They ruined the glory of Iran's army. Through a law in the parliament, they made us part of the Vienna Convention.¹⁶ This means that all American military advisors and their families, their technical experts or office workers, even their servants, are immune from whatever crimes they commit in Iran. ... Gentlemen, I warn of danger! Oh, army of Iran, I warn of danger. Oh Iranian politicians, I warn of danger.¹⁷

But at times, the Ayatollah's deep-seated resentment of all things Western was tempered by the exigencies of the times. Not surprisingly, there was a clear evolution in Khomeini's views toward international relations and foreign policy, from when he first asserted his leadership over the revolutionary movement in 1977 and early 1978 to steadily consolidating power from 1979 to 1981–1982; mustering up public support for the war effort against Iraq until 1988; and ultimately accepting peace with Saddam Hussein and "drinking the poisoned chalice." Leading up to the revolution's triumph, he emphasized the need for "friendly and humanistic relationships" between Iran and the rest

of the world – especially its neighbors.¹⁸ “Our relations with other countries will be based on Islam, and Islam is for all peoples. ... We do not harbor animosity toward anyone,” he declared in 1979. “Whoever treats us with respect, we will be their friend.”¹⁹ “We see no obstacle in establishing relations with whoever treats us with human dignity; we are friendly toward all nations.”²⁰

Especially early on (throughout 1979 and 1980), Khomeini repeatedly told visiting reporters that Iranian foreign policy was on the basis of the principle of mutual respect and defending the country’s freedom and independence.²¹ In speech after speech during this period, Ayatollah Khomeini reiterated the importance of “mutual respect” as a cornerstone of Iranian foreign policy. Iran was willing to have relations with everyone, including with the United States and the Soviet Union, as long as those relations were on the basis of mutual respect and understanding. “Mutual respect will be the cornerstone of our international relations,” he told an audience in 1979. “We will neither impose ourselves on anyone, nor are we willing to accept the imposition of others. ... We will be respectful to all governments that respect us.”²² He even went as far as to extend this position to the United States, stating that diplomatic relations were possible as long as they were founded on mutual respect.²³ In repeated interviews with the international media, Khomeini emphasized that as long as the United States refrained from interfering in Iran’s internal affairs there was no reason for Iran not to have warm and friendly relations with it.²⁴

In the 1980s, as the war with Iraq ground into a stalemate and Iran’s regional and international isolation was set into motion, Khomeini’s tone and his pronouncements became more strident. As Iran’s relations with the Western countries in general, and the United States in particular, went from bad to worse, Khomeini’s anti-American rhetoric became more incendiary. For example, in the summer of 1981, at the height of the hostage crisis, his stance on relations with the United States became uncompromising: “The world must know that Iran is marching in the path of God, and that its struggle against America, that global enemy of the downtrodden, will not cease.”²⁵ In a 1983 speech, he declared, “We must stand firm and strong, and we must defend ourselves against those seeking to attack and dominate us. A thousands honorable deaths are better than living under foreign domination.”²⁶ In another speech that same year, as the Iran-Iraq war raged on, he called Israel and Iraq “two cancerous tumors whose genesis is America.”²⁷

On rare occasions, at least at the beginning of his revolutionary leadership in the late 1970s, Khomeini employed a similarly instrumentalist approach to that readily identifiable fruit of the West: democracy. “In the context of our movement, our Islamic revolution,” he once declared in 1979, “everyone is free, and if everyone has anything to say, they can say it, regardless of what their sect may be.”²⁸ But in 1980, soon after the Islamic Republic was formally established, Khomeini’s approach to freedom changed:

Islam and logic condemn freedom in its Western form, which results in the deviant behavior of the youth. Propagandas, articles, books, magazines, and speeches that oppose Islam, public morality, and the national good are all religiously forbidden. It is incumbent on all of us, all Muslims, to fight these influences. We must fight against destructive freedoms. We all have a responsibility to prevent what is against Islam and the spirit and values of the Islamic Republic. ... Freedom must be within the limits of the law. Islam is our country’s religion, and freedom must be within limits that do not harm Islam. Our constitution has declared Islam as the state religion.²⁹

Its occasional internal contradictions notwithstanding, the corpus of Khomeini's thoughts and speeches provided a potent rallying cry for millions of Iranians for nearly two decades. He masterfully employed the lexicon of the revolution for purposes of mass mobilization and revolutionary legitimation. He referred to the West in general and the United States in particular as *estakbar*, roughly translated in English as "arrogance," and to the masses as *mustazafin*, or "the meek and oppressed ones."³⁰ His speeches were frequently provocative, his use of allegory and imagery compelling: "The protection of the country's borders against aggression, and defense against rapacious invaders, is a logical and religious duty. The only way to ensure this defense is through establishing an Islamic government."³¹ For a people gripped with the fever of a much-anticipated revolution, the allure of his rhetoric was hard to resist. That he promised liberation not just from domestic tyranny but also from the humiliating domination of the West – that seemingly omnipotent obstacle to the aspirations and progress of Iranians – made his revolutionary message all the more compelling. "Our foreign policy will always be based in the preservation of national interests," he promised adoring millions in the streets, and securing freedom and independence would remain the new order's top priority.³²

One of the most important secrets to the success and appeal of Khomeini's thoughts appear to have been oscillation between consistency and flexibility as dictated by changing circumstances. Some of the most prominent features of Khomeini's thoughts include the adoption of clear stances toward political struggle and *jihad*; the direct and unvarnished expression of his positions and his ideas; his single-minded pursuit of objectives and revolutionary spirit; and the articulation of the ideal of social and political justice as inspired by his interpretations of Islam.³³ But when needed, he was also flexible and pragmatic. Independence and freedom from foreign domination were equally prominent themes in his earlier pronouncements in relation to diplomacy.³⁴ The resultant religious-nationalist discourse became the magnetic glue of the revolutionary movement that attracted millions, and the ideology with which the post-revolutionary state defined and consolidated itself.

Throughout his revolutionary discourse, Khomeini stood by his principle of "neither Eastern, nor Western," and insisted on Iran's "independence" from both superpowers. Although he never quite articulated what that independence meant, it was generally understood to mean freedom from the West.³⁵ In all respects, he declared repeatedly that "our foreign policy will be based on national interest as consistent with the values of Islam."³⁶

Islamic Awakening

One of the most salient features of Khomeini's views is the importance he placed on political and cultural "authenticity," and the significance of asserting one's conscious as well as subconscious independence from the West. Throughout the post-revolutionary period, Khomeini reminded Iranians that "freedom and independence are divine blessings given to us through the revolution."³⁷ He consistently decried "the colonization of culture" and the erosion of cultural independence at the hands of the West in ways that had robbed Iranians of their humanity and true self.³⁸ As far back as 1944 he wrote:

It's a pity that we're afraid of Europeans and have lost our self-confidence in relation to them, viewing as weak our own mastery and expertise in the sciences which the Europeans cannot attain in a thousand years. Those who have *Mantiq ul-Shafa* [Avicenna's *Book of Healing*], *Hikmat al-Ishraq* [*Philosophy of Illumination*, by Shahab al-Din Suhrawardi], and *Hikmat*

Muta‘aliyyah [Transcendent Philosophy] of Mulla Sadra do not need the logic and philosophy of the Europeans. They think that a country has moved naturally, and is moving in the direction of divine philosophy, is making mistakes. This is one of the biggest disservices that Muslim writers have done to their own societies.³⁹

Iranians and Muslims need to take pride in their own accomplishments, stop aping whatever comes out of the West, and – most importantly – rise up against regimes that act as lackeys of the decadent West. According to Khomeini, the West had masterfully employed its propaganda to dominate Muslims and Muslim lands.⁴⁰ Local leaders, meanwhile, had become dependent on the West, and lulled their peoples into silence and a slumber, letting the West take advantage of their peoples and exploit their resources.⁴¹

What the Muslim world needed was a rediscovery of its own, Islamic potential. Those very views that were defeated and debunked in Europe have now found acceptance in Iran.⁴² According to Khomeini, “Selfishness and abandonment of rebellion toward God’s path has led us to our present predicament, one in which the West has oppressed us and has placed Islamic countries under the control of others.”⁴³ Embracing Islam does not mean turning our back to science and progress. In fact, Khomeini maintained, Islam is fully compatible with technological and scientific advancement: “In our opinion, Islam is an inherently progressive religion. But we are the enemy of those regimes that under the pretext of progress and modernization adopt the ways of dictatorship and oppression. Before all else, we are against the supposition that oppression and repression are the means to progress.”⁴⁴

As if to prepare his countrymen for the difficulties to come, Khomeini forewarned of the challenges of rejecting outside influences in favor of local and indigenous offerings. “Everyone knows that standing up to the cultural onslaught of the West and the Soviet Union through Islam is extremely difficult,” he warned one of his audiences in the late 1980s, “and that it may even result in hunger and martyrdom.”⁴⁵ Iran was “pursuing an agenda that is unacceptable to Westerners.” This was an Islamic agenda, one that rejected all heresies and encouraged a rediscovery of and a return to the self. It rejected “beliefs in the Left and the Right and sees embracing them at the same level as waging war against God.”⁴⁶ “Our logic, the logic of Islam, dictates that there should be no domination of Iran by non-Iranians. We cannot go under the domination of others. Our final word is that there should be no foreign domination.”⁴⁷

For Khomeini, the solution to the Muslims’ cultural inebriation with the West was an Islamic awakening. Muslims needed to rediscover and once again embrace true Islam, which would become the most effective tool of combating the West. All Western concepts including, especially, its conception of humanity, should be transformed into distinctly Islamic precepts and notions.⁴⁸ Significantly, this awakening needed to have genuine authenticity (*esalat*), one which Khomeini never quite defined but simply assumed everyone readily understood. In the same mold as other thinkers that had influenced him – whether Iran’s own Jalal Al-e Ahmad or Franz Fanon with his notion of “return to the self”⁴⁹ – Khomeini expressly called for a reinvigoration of Islamic activism and a rediscovery of Islam’s revolutionary potentials, all premised on embracing the true and authentic spirit of Islam. Khomeini often referred to “pure and authentic Muhammadan Islam,” which stood in sharp contradiction to “American Islam,” which, in Khomeini’s perception, called for a separation of religion and politics. As mentioned earlier, Khomeini saw no distinction between the two.⁵⁰

There are two primary crises gripping Muslim-majority countries, Khomeini argued: one being

the tension between the regimes of Muslim countries, and the other between the regimes and their citizens.⁵¹ In both instances, he maintained, the primary culprit was none other than the West, for its support of corrupt, repressive regimes across the world and especially in the Muslim world. To remedy this dire predicament of Muslims and combat the West and its lackeys, in the post-revolutionary era Khomeini maintained that it was incumbent on Iran to export its revolution.

Khomeini's pronouncements on exporting the revolution remained ambiguous and vague.⁵² In the early years of the revolution, he repeatedly reiterated that exporting the revolution did not imply attacking others, or sending weapons and troops. Exporting the revolution "means exporting our Islamic culture, our revolutionary and Islamic values. Those places receiving our exported revolution will have their problems solved by adopting our values and revolutionary culture."⁵³ In subsequent years, he revisited the same theme on several occasions. In a 1983 speech, for example, he stated:

When we say we want to export Islam, we do not mean we will get on planes and will attack countries. We have neither said this, nor do we have the capability of doing so. But using the resources that we do have, such as the electronic and printed media, and the groups who travel abroad, we can introduce Islam to others in a way that they accept and adopt it.⁵⁴

He reiterated the same themes again in 1985:

We do indeed want to export our revolution, and we have said so from the very beginning. But this does not mean sending troops. It means letting the world hear our voice. It means having the Foreign Ministry tell the world about the injustices done to Iran by both the East and the West, turning Iran into an exemplar for others.⁵⁵

In many ways, the task of exporting the revolution had already been accomplished, as more people around the world, including a growing number of African-Americans in the United States, were now familiar with Islam and Iran's revolution.⁵⁶

But in the mid- to late 1980s, Khomeini's take on exporting the revolution appears to have undergone striking change. "We cannot consider Iran to be our country," he declared in a 1985 speech. "Our country includes all of the Muslim world, and therefore defense of all Muslims is incumbent upon us."⁵⁷ By 1988, his tone was even more strident:

We declare that the Islamic Republic of Iran will forever be a defender and a refuge for all Muslim freedom fighters. As a defensive and invincible shield, Iran will nourish and support the soldiers of Islam, and will both familiarize them with the principles and values of Islam as well as the means and the resources to fight oppressive and illegitimate systems.⁵⁸

Earlier, in 1987, he had given a similar speech: "Give assurances on my behalf and on behalf of the whole Iranian nation that we will stand with and support all the soldiers of Islam and will come to the defense of all your rights."⁵⁹

Implicit in all this is the theme of Muslim unity. In much of his writings and pronouncements, Khomeini avoided references to the historic chasms that have divided Sunnis and Shi'is along multiple sectarian, theological, jurisprudential and political lines. He stressed repeatedly that

Muslims, regardless of sectarian affiliation, had to remain united in fighting Western domination.⁶⁰ This was particularly the case in the years leading up to the revolution's victory, although it is unclear whether Khomeini's avoidance of Sunni-Shi'i differences should more aptly be attributed to a deliberate strategy of broadening his appeal or the anti-establishment quality of his revolutionary discourse. The call to politicize and awaken the revolutionary potential inherent within their religion was directed at all Muslims – Sunni and Shi'i. The need to unite against Israel and its Western patrons was the duty of all members of the faith, regardless of their sectarian affiliation or country of residence.

At the same time, Khomeini emphasized the importance of propaganda and missionary activities, pointing to the significance of the work done by the country's embassies across the world.⁶¹ Again, allusions to the specifically Shi'i nature of Iran's revolution or its theocracy were conspicuously absent from the Ayatollah's discourse. He maintained that Islam in general, and the Islamic revolution in particular, had been misrepresented abroad, and that the negative portrayal given to it by the Western media needed to be corrected.⁶² Diplomacy had been the Prophet's way, and whether through exporting the revolution or forms of missionary activity, it remained an important tool in defeating the West's designs to undermine Islam and Muslims.

The West

Throughout his lifetime as a thinker, revolutionary and politician, Khomeini never quite defined "the West." As a notion in his discourse, the West at once came to designate cultural intrusion, political repression and enslavement; economic exploitation, imperialism and neocolonialism; and American arrogance all wrapped into one concept. Clearly, the biggest threats posed to Islam and Iran – whether cultural, economic, political or military – emanated from the West. The superpowers had colluded to keep Third World societies underdeveloped; the collusion taking place especially in relation to the natural resources, rich cultures, military power and political development of Muslim countries.⁶³ Because of the domination by the West in these areas, a collective malaise in thought and intellectual production had overcome the people of the Third World.⁶⁴

According to Khomeini, the principal competition between the superpowers lay in dominating the Third World, and they would stop at nothing to ensure the endurance of their exploitative relationships. Of all the countries of the Third World, those in the Muslim world were seen to have suffered the greatest, as the superpowers' competition over them was the most intense.⁶⁵ "We are among the oppressed," he declared at the height of the revolutionary uprising in February 1979. "The superpowers wanted us this way; they discounted us and thought we were nothing. We want to come out of this condition."⁶⁶ "The West and its domestic lackeys wanted to keep our people down and oppressed."⁶⁷ "The only thing the West has to offer is betrayal."⁶⁸ "Western imperialism is only interested in the rape and oppression of the destitute masses."⁶⁹

Khomeini also denounced the West's hypocrisy and double standards in how it conducted itself, and the demands it imposed on others. The West, asserting itself as the principle defender of human rights, did not hesitate to trample on the rights of Third World peoples. Its declarations of support for human rights were merely a tool to fool the masses around the world into thinking that the West was a defender of their rights, at the same time robbing them of their freedom and dignity. Witness, Khomeini the revolutionary proclaimed in 1977, what England – that so-called cradle of democracy and human rights – did to India and Pakistan under the banner of constitutionalism.⁷⁰ In fact, as

Khomeini argues, when read by President Carter, the human rights charter left little room for freedom for anyone other than those whom he specifically approved of.⁷¹ In the West's conception, human rights extended only as far as the rights of the West.⁷²

The superpowers were to be made to know that "even if Khomeini is all alone, he will continue his struggle against world oppression, and, along with the committed revolutionaries and the oppressed masses, will not allow the West to have a night's peaceful rest until our noble objectives are reached."⁷³ Khomeini thus called on Muslims to confront the superpowers and their systematic domination of the Third World so that "they learn of our resolute determination to confront them with our revolution. ... In the same spirit, I declare my complete support for revolutionary movements, especially in Lebanon and Palestine, that fight the oppressors of the Left and the Right."⁷⁴

Within the West, the superpowers in general and the United States in particular are attributed the lion's share of the blame for oppressing the peoples of the Third World, especially Muslims and Iranians. Not surprisingly then, anti-Americanism is a central pillar of Ayatollah Khomeini's thought.⁷⁵ He consistently claimed that from the beginning of their interactions with Iran, the Americans had sought to undermine Iran's interests and destroy Islam. All of their actions, and all of the actions that the Shah took on their behalf, were designed to further enhance their nefarious goal of dominating Iran's domestic and international affairs. The Shah's land reform of the early 1960s, for example, was interpreted as being instigated by the United States as a ploy to open up Iran's market to American exports; in the process bringing misery and suffering to Iranian farmers and peasants.⁷⁶ "America is worse than Britain," Khomeini declared in one of his speeches. "Britain is worse than America, and the Soviet Union is worse than both of them. But today we have to contend with these evil Americans."⁷⁷ In 1977, in reference to President Carter, Khomeini made the following statement: "Ignoring the rights of hundreds of millions of Muslims, and giving a handful of thugs control over their affairs, and giving opportunities to the illegal regime in Iran and the hollow government of Israel to usurp the rights of Muslims and curtail their freedoms, is crime for which American presidents will be held responsible."⁷⁸

Khomeini's anger against U.S. machinations in Iran would continue to grow exponentially as the revolutionary drama unfolded, reaching one dramatic milestone after another. In July 1980, following a failed U.S. military mission to rescue U.S. diplomats held hostage in Tehran, Khomeini's vitriol against the United States was in full swing:

America is the number one enemy of the world's dispossessed and downtrodden masses. America will not stop at any crime to achieve its military, cultural, and political domination of the world. Through its propaganda, which is coordinated by international Zionism, America mobilizes its forces to dominate the oppressed peoples of the world. With its devious and dastardly schemes, America secretly sucks the blood of the innocent and gives no one else the right to live in peace and prosperity.⁷⁹

It should come as no surprise therefore that the American president at the time of the Iranian revolution, Jimmy Carter, who was commonly perceived in Iran to have been one of the Shah's most ardent supporters, was personally targeted for some of Ayatollah Khomeini's most blunt attacks. Throughout the early days of the revolution, when popular revolutionary sentiments were at a fever pitch and as relations between the United States and the revolutionary government were rapidly beginning to deteriorate, Khomeini made repeated references to Jimmy Carter in his speeches. In

September 1979, he pronounced that “the arrogant see the world through their own, particularly deceitful perspective. They have a psychological illness and because of that illness they think the average person does not matter. ... Mr. Carter is one of these people.”⁸⁰

In October of the same year, he also stated that “one of Mr. Carter’s biggest mistakes is that he does not understand the present generation and the depth of today’s Islamic movement.”⁸¹ In 1980, Khomeini continued to address Carter personally in his speeches: “Mr. Carter uses all means of coercion to violate human rights, using all conspiracies and schemes, including military intervention and economic sanctions, to prevent us from reaching and asserting our rights. According to Mr. Carter’s logic, our rights are answered by military force.”⁸² He sustained his point thusly, stating that “superpowers may have guns, but they do not have brains. Mr. Carter has proven this fact.”⁸³

Khomeini felt similar disdain for what he considered to be a mere appendage of the West: Israel. In Khomeini’s discourse, Israel was portrayed as “the most intolerable symbol” of Western tyranny against Muslims.⁸⁴ Israel was a “cancerous tumor” for the countries of the Middle East and the Muslim world, a stooge of Western imperialism to usurp Palestinian lands.⁸⁵ Back in 1963, Khomeini had even accused the Shah of acting as if he were actually from Israel, as his security services had banned all discussions of Israel and its “genocidal” policies against Palestinians.⁸⁶ There was no distinction whatsoever between the West and Israel in his discourse. And, in the same manner that Muslims shared the blame for their domination by the West, the struggle against Israel was hampered by the Muslims’ self-defeating disunity. In a July 1978 interview, a few months before his triumphant return to Iran, Khomeini’s vitriol against Israel was on full display: “Despite their massive natural resources and their population of seven hundred million, leaders of Muslim countries have been unable to cut off the hands of colonialism and imperialism from Palestine. It’s the pursuit of carnal pleasures by these puppets of the West that has kept Palestine in Israel’s claws.”⁸⁷

His revolutionary rhetoric notwithstanding, immediately prior to the revolution’s success in February 1979, when the emerging leaders of the revolution sought to maximize international support, Khomeini displayed remarkable flexibility and pragmatism toward the United States. In a 1978 interview, for example, he reiterated his oft-stated willingness to maintain relations with the United States as long as those relations were on the basis of mutual respect: “Since Israel is a usurper, we will not have any relations with it. But we have no problems with the United States or the Soviet Union, and so long as they do not interfere in our internal affairs, we will maintain friendly relations with them.”⁸⁸ “We have no animosity toward the West,” he said in another interview, “and in fact we hope to maintain cordial relations with them. This will not be the case in relation to those who have maltreated our people. But in general our relations with the West will be friendly and cordial.”⁸⁹

Khomeini showed similar pragmatism in the mid-1980s toward the United States and even Israel, when the necessities of the war effort compelled Iran to seek arms purchases from its two arch enemies. By all accounts, Khomeini was aware of the details of the deal with the United States to purchase arms in return for Iran’s intercession in getting American hostages in Lebanon freed.⁹⁰ The so-called Iran-Contra Affair once again demonstrated that as the country’s wartime leader, Khomeini was extremely pragmatic and did not bind himself to the spirit of his own rhetoric and slogans. Khomeini was similarly knowledgeable about and must have sanctioned Iran’s purchase of arms from Israel.⁹¹ Presiding over a country facing an international embargo on arms purchases and limited options, Khomeini was willing to do whatever was necessary to ensure the country’s defense, even if it meant getting arms from “the Great Satan” or from “usurper Israel.”

Conclusion

From the very start of his revolutionary activities in the 1960s, the West occupied a central position in Ayatollah Khomeini's thoughts and discourse. Shaped and influenced by the domestic and international milieus within which they were articulated, Khomeini's conception of the West – as the primary culprit in the oppression and backwardness of the Muslim masses – was not that radically different from its articulation by other Third World revolutionaries of the time. In fact, as Michael Fischer observed some time ago, Khomeini's violent rhetoric against Zionists, Jews and colonialists was also pretty standard fare, a regular feature of the “revolutionary” discourse of the time in Iran as well as much of the Arab world.⁹²

This is not, of course, to confine the originality of Khomeini's thoughts within the 1960s and 1970s Iranian Shi'ism, or their historic and lasting impact on the broader evolution of Shi'i thought and practice in Iran and elsewhere. Shi'ism, it can be argued, would never have been imbued so intimately with institutional politics – certainly not in its current Islamic Republic incarnation in Iran – had it not been for Khomeini's theories of the earlier decades and his direct actions in the 1980s. More directly related to the West, the international and regional contexts within which the Iranian revolution occurred and matured, and the tangled web of political, diplomatic and military relationships that soon developed between Iran on the one hand and the West and its local surrogates on the other, all combined to place the West and Khomeini's thoughts on opposite, acrimonious sides. Samuel Huntington's thesis of clash of civilizations has long been debunked by serious scholars of international politics.⁹³ But it would not be surprising if his perceptions of Islam's unbending opposition to the West were initially formed by observations of Khomeini's utterances and actions.

Khomeini, of course, was not philosophically against the West or all things Western, and he stated this on countless occasions. Central to his religious-nationalist discourse was the notion of respect for Iran and Islam, and as long as the West was willing to be respectful of Iran's independence and Islam's tenets, it could expect nothing less in return. But, as so often happens, political realities overtook philosophical expositions, and calls for mutual respect and understanding were drowned under the exigencies of revolutionary upheaval, diplomatic rows, hostage taking, war and years of bitter acrimony. Thus ensued an ever-widening gap between Iran and the West – one that continues to this day. For the time being, Ayatollah Khomeini's legacy has not boded well for fostering mutual respect and understanding between post-revolutionary Iran and the West.

¹ M. H. Jamshidi, *Andisheh-e Siyasi-e Imam Khomeini* (Tehran: Pazhoheshkadeh-e Imam Khomeini va Enqelab-e Islami, 1388/2009), p. 51.

² The two standard multivolume sets, nearly identical in content, include *Sahifeh-ye Imam* (Tehran: Markaz-e Nashr- Asar-e Emam Khomeini, 1999) and *Sahifeh-ye Noor* (Tehran: Markaz-e Nashr- Asar-e Emam Khomeini, 2004). I have relied on the print version of *Sahifeh-ye Imam*, which is currently available as a twenty-two volume set.

[3](#) Ruhollah Khomeini, *Mobarezeh ba Nafs ya Jihad-e Akbar* (Tehran: Hadi, n.d.), p. 24.

[4](#) Jamshidi, *Andisheh-e Siyasi-e Imam Khomeini*, p. 65.

[5](#) *Ibid.*, p. 19.

[6](#) Ruhollah Khomeini, *Sahifeh-ye Imam*, vol. xi, (Tehran: Markaz-e Nashr- Asar-e Imam Khomeini, 1999), p. 259.

[7](#) Hamid Dabashi, *Theology of Discontent: The Ideological Foundations of the Islamic Revolution in Iran* (New York University Press, 1993), p. 420.

[8](#) *Ibid.*, p. 413.

[9](#) *Ibid.*, pp. 413–415.

[10](#) Jamshidi, *Andisheh-e Siyasi-e Imam Khomeini*, p. 42.

[11](#) *Ibid.*, pp. 41–42.

[12](#) Azar Tabari, “The Role of the Clergy in Modern Iranian Politics” in Nikki Keddie (ed.), *Religion and Politics in Iran: Shi’ism from Quietism to Revolution* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1983), p. 66.

[13](#) Vanessa Martin, *Creating an Islamic State: Khomeini and the Making of a New Iran* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2003), p. 22.

[14](#) *Ibid.*, p. 63.

[15](#) Ruhollah Khomeini, *Sahifeh-ye Imam*, vol. i, (Tehran: Markaz-e Nashr- Asar-e Imam Khomeini, 1999), p. 411.

[16](#) Reference here is to the Vienna Convention on Consular Relations, passed by the United Nations in 1963, which recognized the right of immunity of diplomats and consular employees.

[17](#) Quoted in Jamshidi, *Andisheh-e Siyasi-e Imam Khomeini*, p. 33. See also Martin, *Creating an Islamic State*, p. 64.

[18](#) Ruhollah Khomeini, *Revabet-e Beinolmellal va Siyasat-e Kharejeh az Didgah-e Imam Khomeini* (Tehran: Moasseseh-e Tanzim va Nashr-e Asar-e Imam Khomeini, 1386/2007), p. 3.

[19](#) *Ibid.*, p. 4.

[20](#) *Ibid.*, p. 4.

[21](#) *Ibid.*, pp. 18–19.

[22](#) *Ibid.*, p. 6.

[23 Ibid.](#), pp. 7–8.

[24 Ibid.](#), pp. 12–13.

[25 Ibid.](#), p. 40.

[26 Ibid.](#), p. 26.

[27 Ibid.](#), p. 43.

[28](#) Ruhollah Khomeini, *Sahifeh-ye Imam*, vol. xii (Tehran: Markaz-e Nashr- Asar-e Imam Khomeini, 1999), p. 324.

[29](#) Quoted in Jamshidi, *Andisheh-e Siyasi-e Imam Khomeini*, p. 264. Not surprisingly, Khomeini made similarly contradictory statements about the media: “Media has an important role in representing our slogans and values to the world. The media must be like a teacher who teaches pupils, and reflect the values of the nation.” And, “The media must be independent and free. And they must be objective in publishing all types of criticisms.” Quoted in Jamshidi, *Andisheh-e Siyasi-e Imam Khomeini*, p. 256.

[30](#) Ruhollah Khomeini, *Estezaaf va Estekbar* (Tehran: Moasseseh-e Tanzim va Nashr-e Asar-e Imam Khomeini, 1386/2007), p. 19.

[31](#) Quoted in Jamshidi, *Andisheh-e Siyasi-e Imam Khomeini*, p. 473.

[32](#) Khomeini, *Revabet-e Beinolmellal va Siyasat-e Kharejeh*, p. 17.

[33](#) Jamshidi, *Andisheh-e Siyasi-e Imam Khomeini*, p. 25.

[34](#) Khomeini, *Revabet-e Beinolmellal va Siyasat-e Kharejeh*, p. 7.

[35](#) For examples of his speeches on this topic throughout the 1980s, see [Ibid.](#), pp. 34–37.

[36](#) [Ibid.](#), p. 17.

[37](#) Khomeini, *Estezaaf va Estekbar*, p. 3.

[38](#) Ruhollah Khomeini, *Sahifeh-ye Imam*, vol. vii, (Tehran: Markaz-e Nashr- Asar-e Emam Khomeini, 1999), p. 57.

[39](#) Ruhollah Khomeini, *Kashf-e Asrar* (Qom: Azadi, [1944]), p. 56.

[40](#) Khomeini, *Estezaaf va Estekbar*, p. 11.

[41](#) Jamshidi, *Andisheh-e Siyasi-e Imam Khomeini*, p. 15.

[42](#) Ruhollah Khomeini, *Sahifeh-ye Imam*, vol. xi, p. 180.

[43](#) Khomeini, *Sahifeh-ye Imam*, vol. i, p. 22.

[44](#) Ruhollah Khomeini, *Sahifeh-ye Imam*, vol. iv (Tehran: Markaz-e Nashr- Asar-e Emam Khomeini, 1999), pp. 1–2.

[45](#) Ruhollah Khomeini, *Sahifeh-ye Imam*, vol. xxi (Tehran: Markaz-e Nashr- Asar-e Emam Khomeini, 1999), p. 327.

[46](#) Ruhollah Khomeini, *Sahifeh-ye Imam*, vol. xvi (Tehran: Markaz-e Nashr- Asar-e Emam Khomeini, 1999), p. 458.

[47](#) Khomeini, *Sahifeh-ye Imam*, vol. iv, p. 91.

[48](#) Jamshidi, *Andisheh-e Siyasi-e Imam Khomeini*, p. 21.

[49](#) See Negin Nabavi, “The Changing Concept of the ‘Intellectual’ in Iran of the 1960s,” *Iranian Studies*, vol. 33, no. 3 (Summer 1999), pp. 333–350. The concept of return to the self was originally popularized by Ali Shariati (1933–1977) as a call to Iranians to rediscover Islam as a central pillar of their cultural identity. See his *Bazgasht beh Khish* (Tehran: n.p., 1973). Khomeini appears to have adopted Shariati’s term in order to widen his appeal among students and the urban bourgeois youth.

[50](#) Jamshidi, *Andisheh-e Siyasi-e Imam Khomeini*, p. 49.

[51](#) Ruhollah Khomeini, *Sahifeh-ye Imam*, vol. ix (Tehran: Markaz-e Nashr- Asar-e Emam Khomeini, 1999), p. 547.

[52](#) R. K. Ramazani, *Revolutionary Iran: Challenge and Response in the Middle East* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), p. 25.

[53](#) Ruhollah Khomeini, *Sodoor-e Enqelab az Didgah-e Emam Khomeini* (Tehran: Pazhoheshkadeh-e Imam Khomeini va Enqelab-e Islami, 1387/2008), p. 33.

[54](#) *Ibid.*, p. 36.

[55](#) *Ibid.*, p. 37.

[56](#) *Ibid.*, pp. 81–82.

[57](#) Khomeini, *Ravabet-e Beinolmellal va Siyasat-e Kharejeh*, p. 44.

[58](#) *Ibid.*, pp. 44–45.

[59](#) *Ibid.*, p. 45.

[60](#) Dabashi, *Theology of Discontent*, p. 426.

[61](#) Khomeini, *Sodoor-e Enqelab*, pp. 46, 52.

[62 Ibid.](#), p. 72.

[63](#) Khomeini, *Estezaaf va Estekbar*, p. 24.

[64 Ibid.](#), p. 36.

[65 Ibid.](#), p. 25.

[66 Ibid.](#), p. 3.

[67 Ibid.](#), p. 4.

[68](#) Ruhollah Khomeini, *Sahifeh-ye Imam*, vol. xi, (Tehran: Markaz-e Nashr- Asar-e Emam Khomeini, 1999), p. 51.

[69](#) Ruhollah Khomeini, *Sahifeh-ye Imam*, vol. iii, (Tehran: Markaz-e Nashr- Asar-e Emam Khomeini, 1999), p. 322.

[70](#) Khomeini, *Revabet-e Beinolmellal va Siyasat-e Kharejeh*, p. 106.

[71 Ibid.](#), p. 108.

[72 Ibid.](#), pp. 111, 124.

[73](#) Khomeini, *Sodoor-e Enqelab az Didgah-e Emam Khomeini*, p. 3.

[74](#) Khomeini, *Estezaaf va Estekbar*, pp. 86–87.

[75](#) Jamshidi, *Andisheh-e Siyasi-e Imam Khomeini*, p. 44.

[76](#) Khomeini, *Estezaaf va Estekbar*, p. 32.

[77](#) Khomeini, *Sahifeh-ye Imam*, vol. i, p. 42.

[78](#) Khomeini, *Sahifeh-ye Imam*, vol. iii, p. 210.

[79](#) Khomeini, *Estezaaf va Estekbar*, p. 16.

[80 Ibid.](#), p. 14.

[81 Ibid.](#), p. 15.

[82 Ibid.](#), p. 15.

[83](#) Khomeini, *Sahifeh-ye Imam*, vol. iii, p. 297.

[84](#) Dabashi, *Theology of Discontent*, p. 426.

[85](#) Khomeini, *Sahifeh-ye Imam*, vol. x, (Tehran: Markaz-e Nashr- Asar-e Emam Khomeini, 1999), p. 159.

[86](#) Khomeini, *Sahifeh-ye Imam*, vol. i, pp. 245–248.

[87](#) Khomeini, *Estezaaf va Estekbar*, p. 11.

[88](#) Khomeini, *Revabet-e Beinolmellal va Siyasat-e Kharejeh*, p. 138.

[89](#) *Ibid.*, p. 137.

[90](#) Mehdi Moslem, *Factional Politics in Post-Khomeini Iran* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2002), p. 67.

[91](#) Trita Parsi, *Treacherous Alliance: The Secret Dealings of Israel, Iran, and the U.S.* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), pp. 95, 118–121.

[92](#) Michael M. J. Fischer, *Iran: From Religious Dispute to Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), p. 154.

[93](#) See, for example, Fouad Ajami, “The Summoning: ‘But They Said, We Will Not Harken’”, *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 72, no. 4 (September–October 1993), pp. 2–9.

7 Gendered Khomeini

Azadeh Kian

Introduction

Grand Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini modified his rhetoric on women and their rights depending on political circumstances and power relations. His discourse and rulings on women underwent tremendous change from the 1960s, when he rejected the Family Protection Law, to the 1980s, when he was in power and forced to respond to the pleas of Islamist women. The evidence for this can be found in more than 610 decrees, sermons, interviews and political pronouncements that Khomeini issued from 1962 until 1989.¹ Khomeini instrumentalized women and women's issues in order to oppose the Shah, but became permeable to the demands of Islamist women who wanted more active roles following the Revolution in a society that was undergoing rapid urbanization and modernization. The religious edicts that he delivered on women's issues as well as his declarations in the aftermath of the revolution reflected the pragmatism of a man in power who was more preoccupied by political considerations and consolidating the Islamic regime than respect for religious precepts or traditions.

Khomeini and the Change in Women's Legal Status

The legal status of Iranian women underwent change following the Shah's agrarian reform programme (or the White Revolution) in the 1960s, which was comprised of six measures; one of which was to grant voting rights to women. The Shah intended to decrease the influence of the landowning class, the *ulema* and the traditional middle class by garnering support for his regime through appealing to the new urban middle class, industrial workers and peasantry. The Shah's decision to enfranchise women created a scandal in Qom, especially among the leading clergy. Khomeini, the most vocal among them, called the act mendacious and scandalous and sent a telegram to the Shah on October 9, 1962, criticizing women's involvement in politics as an anti-Islamic measure²: "By granting voting rights to women", Khomeini argued, "the government has disregarded Islam and has caused anxiety among the *ulema* and the Muslims".³ To make their point, the clergy referred to both Islamic law and the Constitutional Law of 1906. They maintained that the admission of women to the two *majlis* (chamber of representatives and the senate) as well as the municipal and local councils was against Islamic law. Khomeini further stated, with reference to the Constitutional Law of 1906, that granting women voting rights and allowing their candidacy in elections would violate the second article of the amendment to the Constitutional Law, thus abrogating the conditions that Islam had set on voters and the elected.⁴

Khomeini and the Shah's Co-Educational Policies

Another measure of the agrarian reform which concerned women and provoked the discontent of

Khomeini and the clergy was the creation of the Army of Knowledge. Under this programme, young women and men were sent to villages in close proximity to main towns to teach rural children or illiterate adults to read and write as an alternative to military service.⁵ As Iran was primarily an agricultural society in the 1960s, the majority of the population (65 percent) lived in rural areas, and the rate of illiteracy was very high; 85 per cent of women and 65 percent of men were unable to read or write. Likewise, the peasantry made up 55.1 percent of the labor force; the industrial workers 21.1 per cent; and the urban middle class 23.8 percent.⁶ Within such circumstances, the idea of co-education was unacceptable to traditionalists. Accordingly, Khomeini declared that “the Shah is fooling the people by announcing ‘women’s participation in the elections’, grant of voting rights to women or bringing half of the population into the society. These appealing expressions will only bring misfortune, corruption and distress”.⁷ He further declared that “imposing military service to young 18 year old girls is like forcing good Muslims to go to places where prostitution is being practiced”.⁸ Khomeini, like other essentialist clerics, made a sharp distinction between men and women, associating men with the public and women with the private, and perceiving women only as mothers and wives whose most-suited place was the home. Although the veil was not prohibited under the Shah, women who worked in the administration were not authorized to be veiled. This was yet another reason that led Khomeini to stand against the presence of women in the administration, and he criticized the government of the Shah for its reform programme in this regard: “You have paralyzed the administration by letting women in. ... When women enter an institution, their mere presence causes disorder”.⁹

Khomeini’s view of women as biological reproducers and housekeepers compared to men is astonishing, as he was raised by a mother who is said to have had a strong personality. Khomeini was born in 1902 into a well-to-do family in Khomein. Both his maternal and paternal side “came from landed and clerical families well-known in central Iran. His mother was a sister of a local landlord and the daughter of Akhund Hajj Mulla Hosayn Khonsari, a highly respected *mojtahed* (high-ranking cleric) in Isfahan”.¹⁰ A few months after his birth, Khomeini’s father was killed on the road to Arak. To obtain justice, his widow traveled to Tehran, leaving her baby son in the care of a wet nurse. She stayed in Tehran, where she lobbied for three years until one of her husband’s assassins was hanged. Khomeini lost his mother when he was fifteen, and married Qodsi Saqafi in 1929 when he was twenty-seven. The daughter of a prominent Tehran cleric, Khomeini’s wife was fifteen at the time of her marriage.¹¹ She remained Khomeini’s only wife, and they had five children together. Khomeini adored and respected his wife, and the Iranian press would later publish several of the love letters he had sent her when they had been apart.

Khomeini and the end of Quietism

Khomeini had already protested against the modernization and Westernization policies of Reza Shah (1925–1941), the founder of the Pahlavi dynasty. In his book *Kashf al Asrar (The Unveiling of Secrets)*, published in 1943 after the Shah’s abdication, Khomeini denounced the establishment of co-educational schools and prohibition of the Islamic veil in 1936, which he compared to “forcing women to go naked into the streets”.¹² Indeed, for the majority of women who in those years aspired to traditional values and norms, to be seen without the veil was tantamount to being seen naked. For their husbands, fathers or brothers, who in keeping with tradition were the custodians of the family’s honor (*namus*) and women’s “chastity”, this ban tarnished their sense of honor, stripping them of their masculinity – especially as the police were under orders to remove the veil by force. Khomeini’s

sermons and writings indicate that he had been profoundly affected in his honor as a religious man by forced unveiling.¹³ Reza Shah's legal reforms, however, did not undermine religious law, nor did they abolish men's privileges in the family institution. Repudiation, polygamy and temporary marriage all remained in force under the Personal Status Code promulgated in 1933, and marriage was forbidden between a Muslim woman and a non-Muslim man. Reza Shah thus enforced patriarchal authority in both the public and private spheres, and remained in tune with the clergy on the issue of gender inequality and gender social relations.

One major reason for Khomeini's partaking in oppositional politics from the 1960s onward was that Ayatollah Boroujerdi – who had been the main source of emulation as a religious authority since the 1940s, and a quietist who refrained from politics as much as possible – passed away a few months prior to the agrarian reforms of the Shah. Khomeini, who was Boroujerdi's teaching assistant and personal secretary,¹⁴ had never disputed the quietism of his mentor. His death, however, opened up new ways of interpreting Islam. This precipitated the articulation of political Islam by Khomeini, and the emergence of a plurality of sources of emulation. Khomeini, who mistrusted the Shah and his Western backers, opposed his reforms and modernizing project which he considered Western oriented. During the June 1963 uprising in Qom which he led against the Shah's Agrarian reforms, Khomeini accused the Shah in a speech of being a slave of foreign (Western) masters, and lambasted the Shah's war against clerical institutions through his alliance with Israel.¹⁵ Two days after this speech, Khomeini was arrested and the uprising which the Shah had dubbed "the union of the black and red reaction financed by landowners who had lost their lands as a result of the agrarian reforms"¹⁶ was crushed. His release nine months later coincided with the approval in October 1964 of a bill submitted to the parliament by the government which gave American military advisors, their staff and families diplomatic immunity. Khomeini gave a sermon accusing the parliament of signing the document of the "enslavement" of Iran.¹⁷ A few days later Khomeini was forced into exile, where he would continue his opposition to the Shah's regime and his reforms.

The Family Protection Law

In 1967, the so-called Family Protection Law was adopted. It was a reformist interpretation of Islamic laws that gave women the right to divorce and custody of children on the court's approval. The law also increased the minimum age of marriage for girls from thirteen to fifteen. Repudiation was abolished, and although the law did not prohibit polygamy, men were not allowed to marry a second wife without the consent of their first wife and a court's approval. Additional laws were also adopted to facilitate women's access to jobs, including employment in the judiciary and the army. In 1975, during the United Nations Decade for Women, additional laws were adopted, and the minimum age of marriage was increased to eighteen.

From his exile in Iraq, Khomeini attacked the Family Protection Law in the following manner:

This law is against the commandments of Islam. Islam reproves the one who ordered it and those who voted for it. The divorce certificate of women who obtained it through this law should be cancelled. These women should be considered as married women and if they remarry they should be considered as having committed adultery. Likewise, men who consciously marry these women commit adultery as well. Children born under this law are not recognized by religion and cannot pretend to any inheritance.¹⁸

Several provisions of the Family Protection Law contradicted the views that Khomeini had expressed during this period on marriage, including the minimum age of marriage for women and his traditionalist views on gender roles. According to Khomeini, in Islam marriage is not merely a choice, but a religious obligation. In order to encourage marriage, Iranian clerics, including Khomeini, often mentioned the following citation attributed to the Prophet Mohammad: “Young people, get married. Those who have the possibility to marry but refuse to do so do not belong to us. Marriage is my tradition. The hell is composed in its majority of singles. A poor man who refuses to marry for financial reasons does not really believe in God. People who refuse to marry live in sin”.¹⁹ Several *hadiths* (sayings attributed to the Prophet and his successors) and Islamic texts are offered to legitimate early marriage, and according to this perspective, girls are the major beneficiaries of early marriage. Like Khomeini, many other clerics believed that an important number of social problems would be solved if the majority of youth married at the age of puberty. They declared that according to Islam, marriage at a young age produces a strong generation,²⁰ and argued that marriage has several intrinsic merits: it guarantees procreation and the renewal of generations; prevents births outside marriage; satisfies sexual instincts; and provides stability and calm within society.²¹ Repeatedly, Khomeini referred to the tradition of the Prophet, and declared that the ideal wife is one that is fertile, graceful, chaste, dear in her family, humble toward her husband and submissive to his will. She should also make herself beautiful and pleasant for her husband, but her beauty is not in itself enough to make a husband happy.²²

Temporary Marriage

Under the Shah, the civil code authorized men to enter into an infinite number of temporary marriages called *nekah-e monqate'* (also known as *mutah*, or *sigheh*) which could last from a couple of minutes to ninety-nine years. Temporary marriage is specific to Twelver Shi'ism, and is not mentioned specifically in the Quran.²³ Despite its legality within Twelver Shi'ism, the practice has been constrained. For instance, Imam Musa Kazem – the seventh Imam – authorized temporary marriage only for single men. Married men were also prohibited from entering into a temporary marriage, unless they were very far away from their wives.²⁴ Shi'i clerics argued that temporary marriage was practiced under the Prophet before it was prohibited arbitrarily by Umar, the second caliph.²⁵ According to Khomeini, in temporary marriage the man should not be away from the woman for more than four months, and in the marriage contract the woman can stipulate that she refuses sexual relations with her temporary husband. The wife has no right to alimony even if pregnant, and does not have the right of inheritance from her husband (nor he from her) in a temporary marriage. The wife does not need her temporary husband's authorization to leave the home, and if the man decides to end the marriage, he must pay the total amount of money mentioned in the contract if he has had sexual intercourse, and half the amount if he has not.²⁶ Clerics all agree that divorce is not applicable to a temporary marriage – the contract can simply be ended whenever both parties agree.

Such legal opinions were also championed by Ayatollah Morteza Mottahari, who was cherished by Khomeini as a loyal political ally and student. He, too, was a proponent of temporary marriage before the revolution of 1979, and argued that the main difference between permanent and temporary marriages is that the freedom of spouses is much more important in a temporary marriage.²⁷ Spouses should agree not to have children because procreation is not the aim of this type of marriage. In the event that a child is born, however, he or she is regarded as having the same rights as those born into

permanent marriage. After the end of the contract, women should wait forty-five days or two menstruation cycles (*eddeh*) before contracting a new temporary marriage. This measure allows for the identification of the father if a child has been conceived before the end of the contract. *Eddeh* for women in a permanent marriage would be three menstruation cycles.^{[28](#)}

Despite its approval by many Shi'i clerics, most young people in Iran today reject temporary marriage, an option they consider traditional, patriarchal and remote from their expectations in life. Many young people in post-revolutionary Iran, especially girls, equate temporary marriage with legalized prostitution. The result of a quantitative survey that this author took in 2002 throughout Iran reveals that of 6,154 single youths (3,437 boys and 2,717 girls) aged between fifteen and twenty-nine years, and who lived with their parents at the time the survey was taken, only 10 per cent agreed with temporary marriage: 14 per cent of them were boys and 6 per cent were girls.

On the Rights of Men

Although Khomeini's views on women underwent gradual change to endorse their active social and political presence in the public space (both prior to and after the revolution), his theological discourse, in lieu with most clerics of his generation, accentuated the rights of men over those of women:

In permanent marriage, the wife must not leave the house without her husband's permission, and must submit herself to whatever pleasure he wants unless she has a religious excuse. If the wife submits herself to her husband, her maintenance is incumbent upon her husband. If she does not obey him, she is a sinner, and has no right to clothing or housing. The husband does not have the right to force his wife to do the housework. He must not leave his permanent wife for more than four months. The wife has the right to refuse sexual relationship before obtaining her dowry.^{[29](#)}

Elsewhere, Khomeini sets out the following procedure for a dispute between married couples which accentuates the traditional view emphasizing the rights of men:

If the husband refuses to respect the rights of his wife, for example if he refuses to pay her alimony (*nafaqeh*), the wife does not have the right to punish him. She can try to persuade him and if this does not work she can address herself to a judge who will try to convince the husband. If he persists in his refusal, the judge can ultimately order to sell the husband's belongings in order to pay the wife's alimony.^{[30](#)}

Like other clerics of his generation, Khomeini followed the pro-birth traditions of Islam and encouraged large families, attributing to men the choice of the number of children and their names.^{[31](#)} However, unlike many others, Khomeini authorized the use of contraceptives if the husband agrees and it would not lead to his wife's sterility.^{[32](#)} Likewise, he authorized abortion if pregnancy is likely to endanger the mother's life, but did not authorize it for adultery.^{[33](#)}

The Persistence of Gender Inequality under the Shah

Despite statutory changes under the Shah, gender inequalities persisted and women continued to suffer from social, occupational and income disparities. These disparities, along with the absence of

an independent women's movement and the state's monopoly on gender discourse, impeded the awakening of gender solidarity and stunted aspirations for gender equality.³⁴ State feminism (or femocracy) as part of the general policy of the state was unable to profoundly modify the patriarchal culture and customs, as the Shah's state itself remained steeped in those traditions. Regardless of their different political, ideological and cultural aspirations and social statuses, Iranian women bore the burden of a double-edged patriarchal power. At the political level, their destiny had been written by an autocratic monarch that did not believe in gender equality, and merely instrumentalized the gender question in Iran for political purposes. At home, work and even within the opposition movement, women were subject to the authority exercised by their husbands, colleagues and comrades. In this sense, gender submission was one of the only grounds on which both the authoritarian rulers and their opponents, including the new educated middle class, had implicitly agreed on. The instrumentalization of women in turn hindered the emergence of gendered social identities. This further contributed to the failure of secular politics, and provided the Islamists with a popular base among middle- and lower-class women who appealed to Islam to appropriate the values of modernity.³⁵ In the 1960s and early 1970s, thousands of educated Muslim women who were neither traditionalist nor imitating Western images yearned for a religious but modern role model. They became drawn to the teachings of Ali Shariati (d. 1977), who developed a progressive and politicized version of Islam and Muslim women. As a former follower of Shariati told the author in Tehran in 1994: "Shari'ati attempted to revise religious traditions. Following his teachings, we denigrated traditions. For example, we were against pilgrimage which we considered as worshipping an idol. We regarded prayer as a means of struggle".³⁶ Shariati, who attempted to transform religion into an ideology of liberation, denounced the Westernization policies of the Shah, and following Frantz Fanon called for cultural introspection. Shariati was also opposed to the clerical monopoly on religion, and blamed the clergy for having estranged the Iranian youth from Islam.³⁷ His book, *Fatemeh Fatemeh ast (Fatima is Fatima)* became highly popular amongst such young women, and between 1967 and 1972 thousands of them attended his lectures at a religious institute in northern Teheran known as the Hosseiniyeh Ershad.

Shariati reconstructed feminine models in Shi'ism through an original and revolutionary approach to understanding the personalities of Fatima (the daughter of the Prophet and Imam Ali's wife) and Zeynab (Fatima's daughter). He highlighted not only their virtue and piety, but especially their independence of mind, courage, determination, fight for justice, intellectual capacity and political activities against oppression.³⁸ This model found tremendous support among urban religious women who later followed the examples of Fatima and Zeynab by actively participating in the revolution. Ali Shariati's ideas seem to have played an important role in politicizing and radicalizing Khomeini's views. For instance, his famous slogan, "Every place should be turned into Karbala, every month into Moharram, and every day into Ashura", was later adopted by Khomeini.³⁹

Khomeini and Women's Oppositional Activities

The Shah attempted to justify his modernization policies, including granting political and civic rights to women, by appealing to a combination of Western acculturation and Iran's pre-Islamic past. The official line tended to deny that Iran belonged to the Islamic civilization, and tried to erase fourteen centuries of Islamic history. Westernization and modernization policies were thus likely to jeopardize the status of women as custodians of (Islamic) traditions. To mark the separation from the Islamic world, the Shah ordered the organization of the Persepolis ceremonies in 1971, and later revived the

official use of Iran's solar calendar. Along with the American administrations' support for the Shah, these policies paved the way for the expansion of Khomeini's radical Islam. Although Khomeini had under the Shah held conservative views regarding women and their presence in the public sphere, he praised the oppositional activities of leftist women – both students and guerrillas – in his sermon in Najaf criticizing the Shah's celebration of 2,500 years of Iranian monarchy at Persepolis in 1971. The mobilization of the guerilla movements and students against these extravagant ceremonies resulted in the acts of state repression, with both male and female university students being imprisoned and tortured, and several guerrillas being executed. In the following sermon, Khomeini attacked the Shah's regime and severely criticized the clergy for their passivity, and also acknowledged the important role of left-wing women in opposing the Shah:

Recently he [the Shah] has sent stout men [university guards and the SAVAK] to the university and has ferociously repressed students. Some women university students are so badly beaten that they need surgery. Their only offense is their opposition against the ceremonies. They say that our people are hungry. Don't celebrate on the cadavers of our people. Why is Najaf so drowsy? Why doesn't it think about this oppressed and miserable people?⁴⁰

Furthermore, the collective and widespread political involvement of women during the revolutionary years affected Khomeini to such an extent while he was exiled in France that he increasingly articulated an interpretation of Islam according to which the political and social rights of women would be guaranteed by the Islamic state, and women would gain genuine freedom, dignity and respect. He also praised women for partaking in the revolution, declaring, "You are the leaders of the movement. You have shown the path and we have followed you. I recognize this and am your servant".⁴¹ He thus rescinded his earlier stand to recognize women's political rights as lawful in Islam, and even endorsed women's political rights as a religious duty: "Women have the right to intervene in politics. It is their duty. ... Islam is a political religion. In Islam, everything, even prayer, is political".⁴²

In addition to endorsing the political rights of women during the revolution, Khomeini used concepts such as freedom, democracy and democratic government to address the gender question. According to him, "democracy is incorporated in the Quran and people are free to express their opinions and to conduct their acts. Under the Islamic government, which is a democratic government, freedom of expression, opinion, and pen will be guaranteed for everyone".⁴³ This inclusive discourse found wide-ranging support among both secular women, who suffered from prejudices relating to gender inequalities inherent to the Shah's Iran, and traditional women, who were de facto excluded from the Shah's modernization policies and statutory changes.

Post-Revolutionary Iran: Public/Political Sphere versus Private Sphere

After the revolution, the traditionalist clergy attempted to force women back to domesticity. The proponents of traditional jurisprudence argued that men and women are different in their essence and complementary in their duties (*mokamel*). They thus rejected equality, and instead emphasized the notion of equity. As an ultraconservative cleric and the author of a widely read book entitled *The Paradise of the Family* (*Behesht-e khanevadeh*) argued: "God has created women to do the housework, child-bearing and child-rearing. God has created men for activities outside the home, for

confronting the hardships of life”.⁴⁴

Unlike the traditionalist clergy, however, Khomeini encouraged women’s activities in the public sphere. He went as far as to say that “women’s role in society is more important than men’s. Women are active in all aspects but they also raise children who will become active”.⁴⁵ He further declared that “God is satisfied with women’s great service. It is a sin to sabotage this [women’s activity in the public sphere]”.⁴⁶ With Khomeini’s approval, four Islamist women entered the first three parliaments (*majlis*) convened in 1980, 1984 and 1988, respectively. Overall, they occupied 1.5 per cent of the parliamentary seats.

By endorsing women’s political rights and reiterating their political significance, Khomeini intended to obtain their unconditional allegiance to the Islamic state. On the occasion of the referendum for the Islamic Republic, he stated that “all of you [women] should vote. Vote for the Islamic Republic. Not a word less, not a word more. ... You have priority over men”.⁴⁷ Indeed, he was convinced that the loyalty of women would further facilitate the support of their male family members for the regime. He stated unequivocally that “women have done more for the movement than men, for their participation doubles the power of men. Men can’t remain indifferent when women take part in the movement”.⁴⁸

The contradictions between Khomeini’s views on women in the private and public spheres were intensified after the establishment of the Islamic Republic. On the one hand he authorized Islamist women to run for legislative elections and represent the whole nation in the parliament; on the other hand he submitted women to their husband’s will and authority at home. Likewise, he did not limit the role of women to being mothers and wives, but at the same time he was against full gender equality and the autonomy of women. Indeed, he endorsed women’s work outside the household, but continued to consider women dependent on their husbands. One result of this duality is that although in 1986 urban women active in the formal sector of the economy were much more educated than their male counterparts, they were seldom given posts as key decision-makers.⁴⁹

Islamic Veil

Although Khomeini changed his stance on several issues regarding women, his views on compulsory veiling remained unchanged. One reason for this is that the veil is recommended in the Qur’an:

The believing women should lower their gaze and guard their modesty; they should not display their beauty and ornament except what must ordinarily appear thereof; they should draw their veils over their bosoms and not display their beauty except to their husbands, their fathers, their husbands fathers, their sons, their husbands sons, their brothers or their brothers sons, or their sisters sons, or their women, or the slaves whom their right hands possess, or male servants free of physical needs, or small children who have no sense of the shame of sex; and they should not strike their feet in order to draw attention to their hidden ornaments.⁵⁰

As mentioned earlier, the prohibition of the veil under Reza Shah, which compelled Muslim women to unveil in the public sphere, was deemed traumatic to the clergy and traditionalist men and women alike. This decree by the Shah played an important role in turning the veil into a symbol of oppositional politics against the Pahlavis. In the 1960s and 1970s, the veil began to be viewed as a symbol of revolutionary Islam when young women, influenced by Shariati, adopted the veil to mark

their distinct political and religious identity. One of these women told the author in 1994:

When I was a high-school student, I used to wear a small scarf and a short dress over my pants. I then started wearing a chador. Yet by wearing it I did not intend to cover my head or body. Like many other women what I meant to do was to mark my identity. We wore the chador as a symbol of our struggle for a just society.⁵¹

After the revolution, Khomeini justified the veil on the ground that men and women were different in terms of their biological constitution: “In the Islamic system, women do have the same rights as do men. They have the right to study, work, own property, they have the right to vote and to be elected. The only differences between men and women are natural and biological ones. According to Islam, women should wear the veil, but chador is not necessary”.⁵² Khomeini saw a correlation between the attractiveness of women and their fertility, and believed that the veil protected young (fecund) women and secured the moral fiber of society. He declared that the veil was not compulsory for women who were in their menopause with the exception of the *sayyedah* (women who are the descendants of the Prophet’s family), who should continue wearing the veil until the age of sixty.⁵³ Responding to a question on compulsory veiling raised at the beginning of the revolution by Oriana Fallaci, a well-known Italian journalist who was then in her fifties, Khomeini responded, “We say that the veil is compulsory for young women. Through veil we try to control these young women who put on make-ups and go to the streets and are followed by an army of young men. The veil is compulsory for them, not for women of your age”.⁵⁴

Discriminatory Laws to Consolidate Patriarchal Order

Shortly after the revolution, Khomeini’s theory of Islamic government, namely the government of a jurisconsult (*velayat-e faqih*), became the cornerstone of the Islamic Republic, subduing calls for the promised model of a democratic Islamic state. The Islamization of Iran began with a systematic attack on women’s rights when, less than a month after the revolution, the *shariah* (Islamic law) founded on traditional jurisprudential interpretations (*fiqh-i-sonnati*) became the principle source of law and was applied to women’s rights, the family code and penal law. Gender inequality was thus institutionalized; the Shah’s Family Protection Law of 1967 was abrogated; and a series of regressive codes were imposed on women’s rights in both the public and private realms. For example, officials imposed an Islamic dress code and made the veil (*hejab*) compulsory, which was initially aimed at women in the workplace but later directed at the entire female population. Khomeini denounced women who refused to wear the Islamic veil as “corrupt manifestations of the monarchical regime and the West”,⁵⁵ heralding an organized campaign aimed at “purifying” the public sector of Westernized professional women that were associated with the period of the Shah. As a result, thousands of women were dismissed from their posts, others forced into early retirement and those who could not bear the new conditions left the country.⁵⁶ Religion as a marker of identity was reinforced as a result of the constitutional law and government policies that privileged Shi’i heterosexual men. Religious limitations were imposed on Muslim women, who were prohibited to marry non-Muslim men. Muslim men, however, were permitted to marry non-Muslim women under Article 1059 of the civil code.⁵⁷ Men’s superior legal position led some of them to abuse their rights. For example, the number of unjustified divorces initiated by men increased, and the Islamic courts almost automatically granted the guardianship of children to men. This provoked the general discontent of the female population, and forced the Islamist women parliamentarians to prepare

motions to more adequately defend women's needs and rights in the private sphere of the family. Despite their allegiance to the Islamic regime, they held that the teachings of Islam on gender were not being respected.⁵⁸ The divorce law became one of the controversial issues of the first parliament (1980–1984).⁵⁹

Despite equal access to education, until 1993 women were forbidden to enroll at many universities in disciplines such as engineering, law, some branches of medicine and management. The access of women to judicial occupations was also prohibited. Likewise, the constitution of the Islamic Republic attributes religious and judicial leadership exclusively to men (articles 5, 107, 163), remaining ambiguous as to the political leadership (article 115). Indeed, the word *rajul*, used to define the prerequisite condition for assuming the post of president of the Republic, is interpreted as referring to both a man and a renowned personality, which by definition can also be a woman. This ambiguity led women activists to argue that the constitutional law authorizes women to run for presidency. On the occasion of the presidential elections of 1997, eight women presented their candidacy. Their number increased to forty-seven in the 2001 presidential elections, and to eighty-nine in 2005. There were forty-two in 2009. Nonetheless, the meaning of the word *rajul* has not been clarified, and women candidates have yet to be authorized to run for the post of president by the Guardian Council.

In addition to segregating occupational policies according to gender, important limitations were set for women in relation to divorce and child custody. In accordance with a ruling of Khomeini,⁶⁰ the minimum age of marriage for girls was lowered to nine years, but increased to thirteen in 2002 under the sixth reformist parliament. Overwhelming privileges were given to men in matters such as marriage, divorce, guardianship of children after divorce and inheritance. For example, according to article 1105 of the civil code, the man is the head of household and the wife is obliged to submit to her husband (*tamkin*). If she refuses to comply with her husband's authority or issued demands (including sexual demands), he is legally permitted to sanction his wife, and in certain cases authorized to divorce her. Likewise, men retain the exclusive right to divorce (article 1133 of the civil code) and parental authority (*kifalat*) after divorce.

Although the Islamic civil code remains close to Khomeini's rulings which intended to enforce men's rights over those of women in the private realm, his position on divorce was much more in favor of women. Contrary to the majority of the clergy, Khomeini did not stigmatize divorce initiated by women. According to him:

Although it is correct to say that Islam has granted men the right to divorce, but it has also given this right to women. They can, at the time of marriage, ask their husbands to confer powers of attorney on them to divorce, or they can pose their conditions on their husbands. They can therefore initiate divorce whenever they want or under some conditions, for example if the husband does not respect her, or if he takes a second wife.⁶¹

Conversely, Khomeini's position on dowry (*mahr*) did not necessarily favor women, as he had ruled against adjustments to the amount agreed on by both parties in a marriage. In 1982 he declared: "The amount of dowry is stable. It should not vary with the change in the value of currency or according to purchasing power".⁶² Despite Khomeini's ruling, several women members of the fifth parliament (1996–2000), especially Soheyla Jelodarzadeh and Fatemeh Ramezanzadeh, proposed an amendment to article 1082 of the civil code and suggested that the amount of dowry be revalued according to the rate of inflation. Despite the traditionalists' opposition, the motion was passed in the summer of 1996.

Khomeini's paradoxical views which promoted the image of "true Muslim women" as active and strong in the public sphere but docile at the home is also reflected in the constitution and the very foundations of the Islamic state, which encompass both republican and Islamic statutes. Its republican component praises gender equality; its Islamic component establishes gender inequality. Article 20 of the constitution posits the equal protection of men and women by law and their equal political, economic, social and cultural rights, but these rights are conditioned by the Islamic principles. Likewise, article 21 requires the Islamic state to guarantee women's rights in accordance with Islamic principles.

The Iraq-Iran War (1980–1988), which for eight years mobilized the country's resources, very much impeded the advancement of debates on the condition of women in Iran. Women were expected to show their commitment to Islam and the Islamic Republic by accepting gendered roles. Viewed as the primary guardians of tradition, they were in this sense required to reinforce the Islamic family unit and thereby maintain social cohesion. The plight of gender-sensitive women was also overshadowed by the predominant values of self-abnegation, devotion and sacrifice rooted in Shi'i culture and internalized by the young volunteers (*Basijis*) – hundreds of thousands of whom served on the front line. Moreover, the clerical and political elite attributed all shortcomings and problems to the force of circumstances, and used the war as a pretext to dismiss women's social problems.

Despite the active participation of Islamist women in the war effort, and their recruitment by the Pasdaran (Revolutionary Guards) and Basij, the image of the ideal Muslim woman during the war years was also geared to that of the mother and wife who sacrificed her sons and husband in defending Islam, the Islamic state and the honor of Islam as Khomeini stipulated.⁶³ Both television and cinema played an important role in perpetuating that ideological image. For a number of religious authorities – including Khomeini – when a Muslim country is invaded by non-Muslims, "defensive Jihad" became mandatory for all Muslims, regardless of their gender, age or status. Women and men alike were expected to mobilize and defend the honor of Islam and their Muslim country. For this very reason Khomeini endorsed the military training of women and their enrolment in the army and the Pasdaran. This ruling contradicted his position before the revolution of 1979, when he vehemently opposed military training for women or their participation in the Shah's so-called Army of Knowledge.

During the war, women volunteers demanded authorization to go to the front. Khomeini argued that at the time of the Prophet, women went to the front in order to treat the wounded, and thus committed Iranian women were able to participate in the defensive Jihad, mainly through a multitude of activities ranging from taking care of the wounded or the family of martyrs to baking bread and sewing uniforms for the Iranian army and Revolutionary Guards units. But women were also positioned in influential decision-making posts. For instance, Marziyeh Haddidchi Dabbag, a confidante and bodyguard of Khomeini and a member of the second, third and fifth Islamic parliaments, was appointed commander of the Pasdaran in Western Iran.⁶⁴ With the end of the war, the scope of debates on the condition of women expanded. In 1988, the Social and Cultural Council of Women was created by the government to promote women's social and economic activity. In 1992, the Office of Women's Affairs – an offshoot of the presidential bureau – was created. According to Marziyyeh Seddiqi, a member of the fifth Islamic parliament and founder of the Office of Women's Affairs, its aim was to "improve women's status and their economic, social, cultural and political role".⁶⁵

In the 1990s and early 2000s, women's civil institutions aimed at eliminating gender discrimination expanded. Some women's magazines published in the 1990s by Muslim women (especially *Zanan*,

Farzaneh, Payam-e Hajar and *Zan*) criticized civil and penal codes, work legislation, constitutional laws and the state authorities.⁶⁶ Women's press as a civil institution also played a crucial role in bringing together Islamic and secular advocates of women's rights, and establishing a dialogue between them. Despite their political and ideological differences, a sense of gender and class solidarity emerged among these women, who overwhelmingly belonged to the urban middle classes.

Shahla Sherkat, the editor-in-chief of the influential women's Magazine *Zanan* (which was banned in January 2008), told the author in 1994 that "many articles of the civil code are based on the *Shari'a*, its reinterpretation proves necessary and women should be involved in this undertaking".⁶⁷ In November and December 1992, a few months following its publication, *Zanan* printed a series of articles that examined the obstacles against women exercising and holding positions of authority in religious and judicial institutions. These articles maintained that none of the main Islamic texts justified such prohibitions; that no consensus existed among religious authorities on the issue; and that in the past, several women in Iran and elsewhere in the Muslim world had attained the summit of religious authority. The author concluded that "a man has no natural or contractual privilege over a woman. If a man can become a judge so can a woman, and if a man can become a *marja-e taqlid* [source of emulation for the faithful, highest form of religious authority] so can a woman".⁶⁸ These articles were written under a female pseudonym by Hojjat ol-Islam Mohsen Sa'idzadeh, a reformist cleric, who was imprisoned for several months in the summer of 1998 by the Special Court for the Clergy. *Payam-e Hajar*, published by Azam Taliqani, was the first women's magazine to advocate a gender-specific reinterpretation of Qur'anic verses (especially *Surah al-Nisa* [women]), and to contest the legalization of polygamy in 1992: "The analysis of the Qur'anic verse on polygamy shows that this right is recommended in some specific cases and exclusively in order to meet a social need in view of expanding social justice".⁶⁹ The author rejects polygamy as a social necessity on the grounds that the modern state and its social institutions are conceived to assist impoverished families. Under these circumstances, "polygamy has no social function to fulfill".⁷⁰

The women's press contributed to an increase in political awareness among middle-class women, and provided them with opportunities for more active involvement in the public sphere. Women could thus air their grievances as public or political issues as opposed to solely private ones, and ultimately challenge the institutions that they had formerly considered all-powerful. It was with strong hope for radical political, juridical and cultural change that many women, from different social and family backgrounds, participated in the 1997 presidential elections; using their right to vote as a potent means to instigate change. But despite women contributing to President Khatami's election, gender inequality and the issue of the status of women were largely absent from debates between male reformists. Some male reformists went as far as to argue that the question of women and their legal and citizenship rights was unconnected to the building of democracy, and therefore did not constitute an urgent issue for democracy advocates.⁷¹ Likewise, the law continued to regard women as minors, placing them for life under the guardianship of their fathers or husbands. Although the thirteen gender-conscious women members of the sixth parliament (especially Elaheh Koulayi, Fatemeh Haghighatjou, Fatemeh Rake'i, Jamileh Kadivar and Akram Mansourimanesh) proposed bills to improve the status of women (modification of the civil code, facilitating women's access to divorce, sending female students abroad or increasing the minimum age of marriage for girls from nine to eighteen), the Guardian Council rejected these bills, arguing that they were incompatible with Islam. Finally the minimum age of marriage and penal responsibility for girls was increased to thirteen. Likewise, in July 2003 the reformist parliament ratified with some reservations the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women, but this was rejected by the Guardian Council.⁷²

Conclusion

Over the two decades since Khomeini's death, the policies of the Islamic Republic vis-à-vis Iran's women remain ambiguous. The status of women has undergone great changes, leading to a widening gap between the social, demographic and cultural realities of women on the one hand and the laws and institutions of the revolutionary years on the other.

It is important to note the important factor of urbanization, which increased sharply. More than 72 per cent of Iranians now reside in urban areas, compared to 54 per cent in 1986; and the annual population growth rate is now 1.2 per cent, compared to 3.9 per cent in 1986. To stem rural exodus, rural areas have undergone modernization. The majority of villages now have access to roads, electricity, drinking water, schools and dispensaries. The Islamic regime did not succeed in curbing rural-to-urban migration, but the gap between town and country has narrowed. Although the Islamic state remains attached to a patriarchal order, revolutionary changes combined with the implementation of modernization policies – especially in rural areas and small towns – have had important consequences for women from traditional, religious middle- and lower-class families. The scope of change has thus transcended social actors to encompass the entire female population. The average number of children per woman is 2 now, compared to 6.2 in 1986, and 85 per cent of Iranian females aged six years and older are now literate (compared to 52 per cent in 1986). Although up until 1993 women's access to several university courses such as management, engineering and law was prohibited, the quest of young women to attain university education continued, and they increasingly enrolled in universities. The number of female university students increased from 74,000 in 1986 to more than 1.5 million in 2006 (or about 52 per cent of the total). The active presence of young women in education led the older generation, overwhelmingly illiterate, to place a higher value on the education of women. Thus, 86.5 per cent of respondents to a quantitative survey that this author conducted believed that men and women should have equal access to education; with 81 per cent of those polled illiterate women, 92 per cent literate women, and 98 per cent highly educated women. Many poor and illiterate respondents in the survey attribute their inferior status in the family and society to their lack of educational qualifications, which they believe also prevent them from choosing their own husbands. They therefore advocate their daughters' education and financial independence as a crucial means to their empowerment.

These profound changes that have occurred in the lives of Iranian women as a consequence of a modernizing society, as well as the increase in the political awareness of women, are about to weaken traditional perceptions concerning men's authority in both private and public realms. As an opinion poll conducted under the joint responsibility of this author in 2002 demonstrated: only 30.5 per cent believed that housework is women's exclusive responsibility; 15 per cent believed that childcare should be women's exclusive responsibility; 86.5 per cent believed that men and women should have equal access to education; and 77 per cent were for men and women's equal access to work.⁷³ The paradoxical modernization of women's attitudes, despite religious precepts and the predominant Islamist ideology, has also led women to question the enforced laws that promote gendered relations within the family and submit women to men's control.

Many women (including former Islamists) reject religious justifications for gender inequality through a new reading of Islam, which accommodates the equality of rights between men and women. Faced with women's social struggle for equal rights, a new perspective has emerged among reformist clerics. They have opposed the preponderant and rigid interpretations of Islam that essentialize

gender inequalities, and present a contextualized and historicized perspective which attempts to adapt Islam to the modern demands of women.⁷⁴ Grand Ayatollah Yousef Sane'i, who was close to Khomeini, argues that Islam does not forbid women from becoming judges, political leaders or *mujtahideen*, and that they can deliver religious edicts (*fatawa*).⁷⁵ He has also ruled that blood money should be the same for men and women.⁷⁶ Others such as Mohammad Mojtahed Shabestari contextualize and historicize the reading and understanding of the Quran and traditions:

We should understand the Prophet's undertakings in the social and historical context of his time. He has modified certain rights and regulations, which he considered to be unfair to women. He established women's right to property, reformed women's inheritance rights and limited the number of wives for polygamous men. He has thus advanced from injustice towards justice. If we accept this assumption, then we should also admit that the changes the Prophet made in the status of women are not ultimate. The main message of these changes carried out by the Prophet is that other inequalities which are imposed on women throughout history should be abolished.⁷⁷

It remains an open question, however, if Khomeini would have endorsed such contemporary calls for full gender equality.

¹ See Ervand Abrahamian, *Khomeinism: Essays on the Islamic Republic* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993), p. 12.

² Azadeh Kian, "Women and Politics in Post-Islamist Iran: The Gender Conscious Drive to Change", *British Journal of Middle East Studies*, 24 (1) (1997), p. 76.

³ From Ayatollah Rouhollah Khomeini's telegram sent to the Shah on 9 October 9 1962; reproduced in *Sahifeh-ye Nur*, vol. ix (1989a), p. 136.

⁴ From Khomeini's telegram sent to Assadollah 'Alam, the then-prime minister on 20 October 1962, in *Sahifeh-ye Nur*, vol. xxii, (1989b) p. 30. A similar telegram, signed by nine of the highest-ranking religious authorities, was sent to 'Alam in February–March 1963. They included Gulpayigani, Shari'atmadari, Zanjani, Tabatabai and Khomeini. See *Sahifeh-ye Nur*, vol. i, p. 29.

⁵ Farian Sabahi, "Gender and the Army of Knowledge in Pahlavi Iran" in Sarah Ansari and Vanessa

Martin (eds.), *Women, Religion and Culture in Iran* (Richmond, UK: Curzon Press, 2002), pp. 99–120.

[6](#) *Iranian Statistical Year Book*, 1972–1973, p. 3.

[7](#) Ruhollah Khomeini, *Maktubat, Sokhanraniha, Payamha va Fatavi-ye Emam Khomeini* (Tehran: Ashena, 1981), p. 33.

[8](#) *Ibid.*, p. 36.

[9](#) From Khomeini's sermon in Qom, 3 November 1962, in Khomeini, *Maktubat, Sokhanraniha, Payamha va Fatavi-ye Emam Khomeini*, p. 15.

[10](#) Abrahamian, *Khomeinism*, p. 5.

[11](#) Baqer Moin, *Khomeini: Life of the Ayatollah* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1999), p. 37.

[12](#) Ruhollah Khomeini, *Kash ol Asrar* (Tehran: 1943), pp.1–66. For a discussion, see Mansoureh Ettehadieh-Nezam Mafi, in Louis Beck and Guity Nashat. (eds.), *Women in Iran: From 1800 to the Islamic Republic* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004).

[13](#) Ruhollah Khomeini, *Sima-ye Zan Dar Kalam-e Emam Khomeini*, fourth edition (Tehran: Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, 1370/1991).

[14](#) Abrahamian, *Khomeinism*, p. 9.

- [15](#) Roy Mottahedeh, *The Mantle of the Prophet: Religion and Politics in Iran* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), p. 191.
- [16](#) Mohammad Reza (Shah) Pahlavi, *Enqelab-i Sefid* (Tehran: 1967), pp. 45–46.
- [17](#) Mottahedeh, *The Mantle of the Prophet*, pp. 245–246.
- [18](#) Ruhollah Khomeini, *Tawzih ol-Masael*, second edition (Tehran: 1375/1996a), p 330.
- [19](#) Ruhollah Khomeini, *Resaleh-ye Novin*, vol. iii (Persian translation of *Tahrir-ol Vasileh*), Abdolkarim Biazar-Shirazi (ed.), (Tehran, Iran: Daftar-e Nashr va Farhangu-e Eslami, 1995) fourth edition, pp. 43–44.
- [20](#) A. Qaemi, *Tashkil-i Khanevadeh dar Eslam* (1994), pp. 21, 24.
- [21](#) *Ibid.*, p.16.
- [22](#) Ruhollah Khomeini, *Resaleh-ye Novin*, p. 44.
- [23](#) Shahla Haeri, *Law of Desire: Temporary Marriage in Iran* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1989).
- [24](#) Morteza Mottahari, *Nezam-e Hoquq-e Zan dar Eslam*, seventeenth edition (Tehran: 1372/1993), p. 82.

[25](#) Ahmad Azari-Qomi, an influential cleric in post-revolutionary Iran (d. 2000), referred to Umar's testament that recognizes the existence of temporary marriage under the Prophet and demanded "the Sunni brothers" consider its prohibition by Umar as a temporary measure that can by definition be lifted. Ahmad Azari-Qomi, *Sima-ye Zan dar Nezam-e Eslami* (Qom: 1372/1993), pp. 100–101, in Ziba Mir-Hosseini, *Islam and Gender: The Religious Debate in Contemporary Iran* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), pp. 69–71.

[26](#) Khomeini, *Tawzih ol-Masael*, p. 276.

[27](#) Mottahari, *Nezam-e Hoquq-e Zan dar Eslam*.

[28](#) *Ibid.*, pp. 56–57.

[29](#) Khomeini, *Tawzih ol-Masael*, p. 275.

[30](#) Khomeini, *Resaleh-ye Novin*, p. 89.

[31](#) *Ibid.*, p. 104.

[32](#) *Ibid.*, p. 100.

[33](#) *Ibid.*, p. 101; and Khomeini, *Tawzih ol-Masael*, p. 278.

[34](#) Parvin Paidar, *Women in the Political Process of Twentieth Century Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

[35](#) Azadeh Kian, *Secularization of Iran: A Doomed Failure?: The New Middle Class and the Making of Modern Iran* (Paris: Peeters, 1998), pp. 144–148, 240–254.

[36](#) Author's interview, Tehran, July 1994.

[37](#) Hamid Dabashi, *Theology of Discontent. The Ideological Foundation of the Islamic Revolution in Iran* (New York: New York University Press, 1993) pp. 102–144. Also see Ali Rahnema, *An Islamic Utopian: A Political Biography of Ali Shari'ati* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2000).

[38](#) Ali Shari'ati, *Red Shi'ism*, translated by Habib Shirazi, (Tehran: The Shari'ati Foundation, 1979), pp. 11–12. Also see Ali Shari'ati, *Fatemeh Fatemeh Ast* (Tehran: 1976).

[39](#) S. Najafabadi, *Shahid-e Javid* (Tehran: Forough Danesh Press, 1981); and Abrahamian, *Khomeinism*, p. 29.

[40](#) Ruhollah Khomeini, *Bayanat-i Hazrat-i Ayatollah Khomeini dar Bareh-ye Jashn ha-ye Dowhezar va Pansad Saleh*, published in *Shanzdah-i Azar*, 7 August 1971.

[41](#) From Khomeini's sermon in Qom, 27 April 1979. Published in *Payam-e Zan*, no. 3, 1992, p. 39.

[42](#) Khomeini's sermon on 19 September 1979, in *Sahifeh-ye Nur*, vol. xi (1989a), p. 136.

[43](#) From Khomeini's sermon on 1 February 1979, in *Sahifeh-ye Nur*, vol.vii (1989c), p. 120.

[44](#) Seyyed Javad Mostafavi, *Behesht-e Khanevadeh*, vol. i, p. 116.

[45](#) Khomeini, *Sahifeh-ye Nur*, vol. xiv (1989d), p. 130.

[46](#) From Khomeini's declaration issued on 12 March 1982, in *Sahifeh-ye Nur*, vol. xvii (1989e), p. 211.

[47](#) From Khomeini's sermon to a group of women in Qum, 7 March 1980, in *Sahifeh-ye Nur*, vol. v (1989f) p. 177.

[48](#) From Khomeini's sermon to a group of women, members of the Society of Women of the Islamic Revolution, Shemiran, 12 July 1980, in *Gozideh ha-i az Maqalat-i Payam-i Hajar*, no. 1 (Tehran: Jami'eh-i Zanan-i Inqilab-i Islami Publications, 1982), pp. 6, 77.

[49](#) According to the National Census of the Population and Housing, 78 per cent of active women in urban areas were employed in the service sector; 46 per cent of these active women had a high school diploma, compared to 26 per cent of active men; and 18 per cent of active women in urban areas had a university degree compared to 6 per cent for active men, vol. vi (Tehran: Sarshomari-ye Umimi-ye Nofous va Maskan, Natayej-i Tafsili, 1986), Table 25, p. 211; and Vijegiha-ye Ejtema'i va Eqtesadi-ye Zanan dar Iran (1365–1375) (Tehran, Statistical Center of Iran, 2000), p.156; Azadeh Kian, "Gendered Occupation and Women's Status in Post-Revolutionary Iran", *Middle Eastern Studies*, 31, no. 3 (1995), pp. 407–421.

[50](#) Surat al-Noor, verse 31, *The Qur'an*, translated by Abdullah Yusuf Ali (New York, 1995), p. 228.

[51](#) Personal interview, Tehran, July 1994.

[52](#) Khomeini in *Sahifeh-ye Nur*, vol. iv (1989g), p. 34.

[53](#) *Ibid.*, p. 103.

[54](#) Khomeini in *Sahifeh-ye Nur*, vol. ix (1989a), p. 96.

[55](#) *Sahifeh-ye Nur*, vol. x (1989h), p. 234.

[56](#) Azadeh Kian, *Les femmes iraniennes entre islam, Etat et famille* (Paris: Maisonneuve & Larose, 2002).

[57](#) Mohammad Zamiran and Shirin Ebadi, *Sonnat va Tajaddod dar Hoqouq-e Iran* (Tehran: Ganj-i danesh, 1996), p. 248.

[58](#) See Marzieh Dabbagh's remarks, in "Zanan va Naqsh-e Anan dar Majlis", *Neda*, 17–18 (Winter 1996), p. 9.

[59](#) Author's interview with Azam Taleqani, member of the first parliament, Tehran February 1996. See also Haleh Esfandiari, "The Majles and Women's Issues in the Islamic Republic of Iran" in Mahnaz Afkhami and Erika Friedl (eds.), *In the Eye of the Storm: Women in Post-Revolutionary Iran* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1994).

[60](#) Khomeini, *Tawzih ol-Masael*, p. 279.

[61](#) Khomeini's declaration during his meeting with a group of women in Qom on 6 March 1979, in

Sima-ye Zan Dar Kalam-e Emam Khomeini, fourth edition (Tehran: Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, 1370/1991), p. 169; and *Sahifeh-ye Nur*, vol. x, p. 78.

[62](#) Khomeini, *Sima-ye Zan dar Kalam-e Emam Khomeini*, p. 173; and *Estefta'at*, vol. i, p. 210.

[63](#) Ruhollah Khomeini, “Zanan va Defa’-e Moghaddas”, in *Jaygah-e Zan dar Andisheh-ye Emam Khomeini*, vol. viii (Tehran: Mo’asessheh-e Tanzim va Nashr-e Asar-e Emam Khomeini, 1996b), pp. 200–221.

[64](#) Azadeh Kian, “Women, Gender and Jihad: Iran and Afghanistan”, in Suad Joseph (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Women and Islamic Cultures*, vol. ii (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2004), p. 325.

[65](#) Author’s interview, Tehran, July 1996.

[66](#) Azadeh Kian, “Women and the Making of Civil Society in Post-Islamist Iran”, in Eric Hooglund (ed.), *Twenty Years of Islamic Revolution. Political and Social Transition in Iran since 1979* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2002), pp. 56–73.

[67](#) Author’s interview, Tehran, July 1994.

[68](#) Mina Yadigar Azadi, “Qezavat-i Zan”, *Zanan*, 1 (5) (Khordad-Tir 1371 [May–July 1992]), p. 21; and “Ijtehad va Marja’iyyat-e Zanan”, *Zanan*, 8 (Aban-Azar 1371 [October–December 1992]), p. 24.

[69](#) Forouq Ebn-Eddin, “Lozoum-e Eslah-e Qavanin-e Talaq, T’addud-e Zojat va Hezanat”, *Payam-i Hajar* (19 Shahrivar 1371 [10 September 1992]), pp. 28–29.

[70](#) [Ibid.](#), p. 29.

[71](#) See inter alia, Abbas Abdi's interview, "Rawshanfikri-yi Dini va Masa'il-i Fawritar az Masa'il-i Zanan" in *Zanan*, 58 (2000), p. 38.

[72](#) Azadeh Kian, "Gendered Citizenship and the Women's Movement in Iran", in Rouzbeh Parsi (ed.), *A Revolutionary Republic in Transition (Chaillot Paper)*, (Paris: Institute for Security Studies [EU], 2012), pp. 61–79.

[73](#) Azadeh Kian, "From Motherhood to Equal Rights Advocates: The Weakening of Patriarchal Order" in Homa Katouzian and Hossein Shahidi (eds.), *Iran in the 21st Century: Politics, Economics and Conflict* (London: Routledge, 2008), pp. 86–106.

[74](#) Azadeh Kian, "Gendering Shi'ism in Post-revolutionary Iran" in Roksana Bahramitash and Eric Hooglund (eds.), *Gender in Contemporary Iran: Pushing the Boundaries*, Iranian Studies Series, (London: Routledge, 2011), pp. 24–35.

[75](#) Yousef Sane'i's interview, *Payam-i Zan*, no. 63 (May 1995), p. 6.

[76](#) Yousef Sane'i's interview with *Farzaneh*, no. 10 (Winter 2000), pp. 19–20.

[77](#) Mohammad Mojtahed Shabestari, *Naqdi bar Qara'at-e Rasmi az Din. Bohranha, chaleshha, Rah-e Halha* (Tehran: Tarh-i Naw, 2000), pp. 503–504.

8 Hidden Khomeini

Mysticism and Poetry

Lloyd Ridgeon

Introduction

This chapter will discuss an important but all-too-frequently neglected dimension of Ayatollah Khomeini's worldview; namely, his perspective on mysticism. Some observers witness reflections of this outlook throughout the whole of his life. Indeed, it has even been claimed that Khomeini believed he himself had achieved mystical union. It will be argued in this chapter that the idea of mystical union was discussed by Khomeini in great detail in the 1930s. His works from this period betray the legacy of Ibn Arabi and Mulla Sadra, and Khomeini combined the *'irfani* ideas of these thinkers with elements of Shi'ism so that his message became more palatable to the Iranian milieu. Subsequently, Khomeini remained silent on the mystical tradition until the 1980s, when a small volume of his *ghazals* reflecting the deep stylistic influence of Hafez was published. More intriguingly, in a letter prefacing the *ghazals*, Khomeini categorically denied that he had ever experienced anything mystical through his study of Ibn Arabi's works. This chapter argues that if this statement is to be believed, it falsifies the claim of Baqer Moin that Khomeini himself had completed the so-called four journeys to perfection, and undermines the argument of those who witnessed the lifelong influence of *'irfan* on Khomeini, which of course has profound political implications

The juxtaposition of Khomeini as a *faqih* whose authority is on the basis of the ability to determine the probable will of the Hidden Imam with that of the mystic who is able to commune with the divine appears to be somewhat incongruous. In essence, the problem can be summarised as one that pits the fallible knowledge of the *faqih* against the assured and verified experiential claims to truth of the mystic. Such a conflict has been at the heart of a dispute that has raged within the Islamic world for centuries. It has not been confined to the Shi'i world, as within the Sunni tradition, too, there is ample evidence of the antipathy of jurists (and also theologians and other learned scholars) towards the Sufi tradition.¹ In general, much of the hostility has been directed at the innovations of certain Sufi practices (such as the *sama'*) and ontological world views (in particular, those that promoted the idea of existential unity) such as the so-called unity of existence (*wahdat al-wujud*), which have provoked considerable ire.²

The influence of Sufism was dramatically curtailed with the establishment of Shi'ism as the state religion of the Safavid dynasty in Iran in 1501, and the subsequent rise to power of clerics who were able to legitimise the authority of the Shah in the absence of the Hidden Imam (who was understood to be the rightful possessor of spiritual and temporal power). Many of the Sufi orders were ruthlessly purged, and in order to survive Sufis had no choice but to leave the region or adopt Shi'ism.³ Although the orders (*tariqa*) suffered irretrievably under the Safavids, mystical scholarship (*'irfan*)⁴ thrived; speculative *'irfan* combined philosophy and Shi'ism that developed within the School of Isfahan, and is epitomised by the writings of scholars including Mir Damad (d. 1631), Mulla Sadra (d. 1640) and Shaykh Baha' al-Din al-Amili (d. 1621).⁵ However, the Persian Sufi tradition never

achieved the same degree of sociopolitical and religious impact and prestige that it had enjoyed in the medieval period. With the onset of modernity and increasing influence of Western thought in Iran, Sufism faced new challenges to its “irrational” and “superstition-bound” world view, which the ascendant Usuli school of Shi’ism was able to meet because of its insistence on the use of scripture and reason to reach decisions of legal and theological importance.⁶ Nevertheless, the mystical tradition could not be completely eradicated from Iran, and although the Sufi orders were increasingly weakened, the mystical world view remained strong among some of the most respected scholars, including Hajji Mulla Hadi Sabzawari (d. 1878).⁷

But the juxtaposition of *fiqh* and *’irfan* in Khomeini’s world view is not as strange as it may appear at first glance, especially as celebrated Shi’i thinkers including Shaykh Baha’i and Sabzawari also wrote on *hikmat* (philosophical mysticism) and jurisprudence. Nevertheless, the pursuit of *’irfan* in the *madrasa* environment when Khomeini was a student in Qum remained beyond acceptability, for as Vanessa Martin has noted, it was considered a “challenge to established authority.”⁸ Opposition to *’irfan* and Sufism reached the extent that “mollahs openly advised their followers to avoid books such as Rumi’s *Mathnawi*, which had to be removed with pincers from the homes of pious Muslims.”⁹ Indicative of this is that in Mashhad during the 1920s, Badi al-Zaman Furuzanfar (the scholar who was to become the leading expert of Rumi in modern Iran) could not find a copy of Rumi’s *Diwan-i Shams*.¹⁰

Khomeini’s Early Prose Writings on ’Irfan

In his early years in the seminary, Khomeini met a series of scholars learned in *’irfan* who were prepared to teach him. When one of these died, Khomeini referred to the suspicion surrounding his teacher’s *’irfani* views, which necessitated a preacher declaring from the *minbar* that the individual in question had actually been seen reading the Qur’an.¹¹ Nevertheless, Khomeini’s interest and pursuit of *’irfan* continued unabated, and by 1929 he had composed his first work on the topic. This was a commentary on a Shi’i prayer, *Tafsir Du’a’-yi sahar* (*Dawn Supplications*).¹² In this work, Khomeini supposedly demonstrated the compatibility of the *shariah* with *irfan*. The commentary also revealed Khomeini’s debt to Ibn ’Arabi (the great master of *’irfan* from Andalusia whose work has fascinated Sufis and mystics since the thirteenth century). Khomeini discussed the “Perfect Man,” an individual whose function had been elaborated on by Ibn ’Arabi and his followers in great depth.¹³ Simply put, the Perfect Man acts as a conduit between God and His creation, and through whom all of God’s attributes may be witnessed.¹⁴

Khomeini’s subsequent work, *Misbah al-Hidayat* (*The Lamp of Guidance*),¹⁵ further revealed his attachment to the *’irfani* tradition and perfection of the human being. In a language dense in Akbarian terminology and themes,¹⁶ he “demonstrated an intimate awareness of Ibn ’Arabi’s problematic,”¹⁷ and amalgamated these with certain ideas that had been formulated by Mulla Sadra. Ibn ’Arabi (and the school associated with him) had elaborated on the theme of the descent and return to God, and the classification of existence in to “presences”¹⁸ by which the underlying unity of existence in its absolute and single form (God), and also in its diverse manifestations (creation), may be comprehended. Khomeini’s synthesis of these topics within Mulla Sadra’s four journeys (*asfar arba’a*)¹⁹ assumes great significance for some scholars because it legitimised social engagement and political involvement. That is to say, Khomeini’s passion for *’irfan* was not an otherworldly diversion from the harsh realities of life in Iran under Reza Shah. Khomeini may have inherited such a

persuasion from his master in 'irfan, Mirza Muhammad 'Ali Shahabadi (d. 1950), who “did not believe in public quietism and was one of a small group of mollahs who actively opposed Reza Shah’s policies.”²⁰ To unpack the full significance of Khomeini’s *Misbah al-Hidayat* and its political implications it is necessary to summarise and see how the individual – or rather, the Perfect Man – travels from creation to God and back again, and also focus on the identity of such an individual and the outcome of his journey.

Although Khomeini’s elaboration of the four journeys is relatively brief, its very location as the terminal point of *Misbah al-Hidayat* is highly significant. The first journey commences from creation (i.e., mundane existence) to the delimited Truth (*haqq-i muqayyad*), where the beauty of the presence of the Truth is witnessed through the active manifestation of the Truth in the world of existence. In other words, the traveller witnesses the whole of creation as a manifestation of the presence of the Truth.²¹ During the first journey, he casts aside three veils: those of his carnal soul (*nafs*), his intellect (*'aql*) and his spirit (*ruh*). This permits the annihilation of the self, and he also makes ecstatic utterances (*shathiyat*) “which are condemned as infidelity.”²²

This description of the first journey (like the others that follow) manifests Khomeini’s debt to the Sufi tradition. Although there is much terminology from the Akbarian tradition, his all too brief treatment of annihilation and ecstatic utterances reflect knowledge of the wider and more general Sufi tradition. Annihilation (*fana'*) became the central doctrine of Sufis in the early medieval period, and it generally meant the stripping away of impermanent, temporal concerns from the wayfarer (inferring that what subsisted was divine). In this process, the wayfarer would often utter ecstatic statements, which are the seemingly “outrageous” declarations made by famous Sufis such as Hallaj’s “I am the Truth” or Abu Yazid’s “Glory be to Me! How great is My majesty.”²³ According to the Sufi world view, at the height of mystical experience, the Sufi is unable to control his actions, and the statements that emerge from the mystic reflect the reality of an underlying unity between lover and beloved.

The second of Khomeini’s four journeys is an expression for travelling from the delimited truth to absolute Truth. In Khomeini’s terms, the Truth Most High discloses Himself in the station of complete unicity (*maqam-i wahdaniyyat*).²⁴ Another way that this second journey is described is travelling from the Truth towards the Truth by means of the Truth.²⁵ This means that the traveller voyages from the delimited God (or the presence that represents God’s knowledge of everything) to the Absolute God (which is the presence that transcends all but conceptual knowledge of its ultimate existence). In fact, Khomeini declares that this is the station of annihilation from annihilation, which resembles the doctrine of the celebrated Sufi Junayd of Baghdad (d. 910),²⁶ by which he probably meant that the wayfarer is not even aware of annihilation or himself because his essence, attributes and acts are annihilated in the essence, attributes and acts of the Truth.²⁷ Khomeini warns his readers that ecstatic utterances may emerge at this stage, too, and as such reflect imperfections in the spiritual wayfarer, and for this reason he argues that a guide is necessary. Such a guide does not step outside of the legally permitted ascetic discipline (*riyadat-i shar'i*).²⁸ The explanation of the second journey indicates that Khomeini was very much a sober-minded advocate of 'irfan, perhaps one that eschewed some of the traditional Sufi practices and rituals. Perhaps Khomeini’s personal path was a simple form of spirituality that included prayer and scrupulous attention to external and inner purity, in addition to the study of speculative mystical writings.

The third journey commences through divine favour: the spiritual traveller starts from the Truth and moves back to the real creation (*al-khalq al-haqqi*) by means of the Truth. Khomeini offers another expression by which to understand this third journey: the wayfarer journeys from the presence of inclusive unity (*al-ahadiyya al-jami'iyya*) to the presence of the immutable entities (*al-*

a'yan al-thabita). These terms would be familiar to scholars of the so-called *wujudi* tradition of Ibn Arabi. The first refers to the presence of the Absolute Truth, and the second is God's knowledge of all the things that have the potential to exist in their particular modes. Thus, the immutable entities are every single thing in creation, which are not universals in the Platonic sense.²⁹ Having passed the stages of annihilation in the first journey, and annihilation of annihilation in the second journey, in the third journey the wayfarer subsists through God. Again, the terminology is typically Sufi: according to medieval Sufi texts, subsistence (*baqa'*) becomes apparent as the wayfarer's existence is annihilated, revealing a pure and obedient individual that lives, acts and knows through God. Moreover, according to Khomeini, at this stage the traveller manifests a complete sobriety (the inference being that no ecstatic utterances are made). Importantly, Khomeini mentions that it is in this journey that the wayfarer yields a portion of prophecy, although he is not permitted the station of legislative prophecy.³⁰

The fourth journey is from creation to the creation by means of the Truth. To use another expression used by Khomeini, it is from creation (or the Truth, as the presence of the immutable entities) to the creatures (which are the entities that have an outward disclosure [*al- a'yan al-kharijiyya*]). The traveller is able to witness the beauty of the Truth in all of these entities. Moreover, it is in this station that he brings religion and the law (*din wa shari'a'*), makes exoteric commands pertaining to the body and esoteric laws pertaining to the heart and informs the people about God and His attributes and names, encouraging them to turn to their Lord.³¹

The fourth journey is not solely the preserve of the prophets, as Khomeini states that these four can be yielded by the perfect friends, such as Ali and his immaculate children (the twelve Imams): "Know that these journeys are also yielded for the complete friends, even the fourth journey, just as they were yielded for our master, the Commander of the Faithful and his immaculate children (God's greetings upon them)."³² He legitimises his position with reference to his spiritual teacher, Shahabadi, whom he terms the perfect gnostic (*al-arif al-kamil*)³³: "If Ali had appeared prior to God's prophet he would have manifested the *sharia* of Islam."³⁴ It is highly significant that Khomeini does not include any other individuals among those who could complete the four journeys. Ali and the immaculate Imams were able to do so because (according to Shahabadi) they shared the same spirituality and exoteric and esoteric stations with the Prophet.

In the history of Sufism and *'irfan* there has been considerable debate relating to the spiritual levels of the Prophet and the Sufis (also known as the Friends of God). Ibn Arabi is a good example of this, for just as he stated the normative Islamic belief that Muhammad was the seal of the prophets (i.e., the last and best of the prophets), so, too, was there a seal of the Friends of God who enjoyed the same spiritual level as the Prophet, although he did not possess prophetic and therefore legislative authority. Moreover, Ibn Arabi claimed that he was the Seal of the Friends of God.³⁵ Although Khomeini's debt to the Great Shaykh is clear in his discussion of the four journeys, he does not specifically identify a Friend of God or gnostic after the twelve Imams who can complete these four journeys. The significance of this point should not be underestimated, especially as different opinions have emerged on the very topic of the political ramifications of Khomeini's discussion of the four journeys. The next section will examine three main perspectives on the issue. The significant point is whether Khomeini believed that he himself had completed the four journeys; that is to say, that he had travelled to God, and returned to creation and implemented the divine laws.

The first perspective is that Khomeini did not believe that he completed the four journeys. Typifying this view is Hamid Algar, who has a favourable opinion of the *Misbah al-Hidayat*. He states, "[It] ... is less important for the wide erudition it displays than for the complete practical

mastery of the art of *irfan* that underlies it; it is not a digest of received opinions and formulations but the manifest fruit of a powerful and original vision.”³⁶ This last sentence may make it seem that Algar believed that at the very least the Ayatollah had “knowledge by presence”;³⁷ however, a recent email exchange with Algar has clarified the matter. I asked Algar whether the *insan-i kamil* or Perfect Man (the individual who completed the four journeys) referred to the prophets and Twelve Imams alone. Algar confirmed:

Insofar as *insan-i kamil* [the perfect man] represents a principle rather than an identifiable individual – although it was indeed manifested in identifiable individuals such as the *Maūmīn* [the infallible Twelve Imams] – it is a principle which may be striven after if not fully attained ... the assertion that Imam Khomeini believed that he had completed the four journeys and therefore attained the status of *insan-i kamil* is, I think, unwarranted.³⁸

Algar’s perspective seems to be supported by Alexander Knysh, who has also studied the *Misbah al-Hidayat*. His analysis of Khomeini’s writings indicates that he considered Khomeini more of a “theoretical mystic” than one who had “knowledge by presence.” Knysh described the *Misbah* as “the work of a beginner ... lacking in focus ... embracing a great deal of important, yet often poorly digested information. It seems likely that, at the beginning, young Khomeini was too overwhelmed and fascinated by the tradition to make a coherent rendition of it.”³⁹ However, he also claimed that Khomeini’s ideas of vicegerency and sainthood rested “on an inextricable fusion of personal experience and putatively objective ontological thinking.”⁴⁰ The personal experience may refer to both Khomeini’s ascetic spiritual practice and his belief in some kind of spiritual unveiling.⁴¹ However, it is unknown to what extent Khomeini engaged in “practical gnosis” (*irfan-i ’amali*), which would have involved “a strict regimen of ascetic self-purification leading to a direct perception of the suprasensory realm,”⁴² and included rituals such as the *dhikr* (the ritualised repetition of God’s names), night vigils and various supererogatory acts of devotion.⁴³ Ever since the Islamic Revolution, Khomeini has been more commonly associated with “speculative gnosis” (*irfan-i nazari*), perhaps because of the negative connotations made about practical gnosis among some clerical circles of Sufism.

The second perspective relating to Khomeini’s putative completion of the four journeys is one that errs on the side of caution. An example of this is present in the work of Martin, who focuses on the identity of those who had completed the four journeys:

Khomeini’s precise position on these ideas was ambiguous. The references in *The Light of Guidance* suggest that he identified a perfect man as one who has the status of prophets and imams. He says that the one who understands the fourth journey reaches the level of legislative prophecy, again implying that it is highly unlikely to be possible for ordinary believers. There is however, a hint that the status of perfect man may be achieved by ordinary mortals, but only the rarest few.⁴⁴

Martin subsequently suggested that Khomeini’s understanding of these ideas influenced his implementation of the *velayat-e faqih*, which will be discussed in the next section.

However, Khomeini’s passage within his sections on the four journeys is transparently clear: those who complete the journeys are the prophets and the Imams. The doctrine of the Perfect Man holds that

there can only be one at any given time.⁴⁵ only a single individual can manifest the totality of the divine attributes and names that reflect the reality of unity in multiplicity. If two such perfect individuals existed, then unity would be negated. This Sufi belief converges with the Shi‘i principle that the Twelfth Imam serves this very function. He is the *Khalifa*, albeit in occultation, but present and alive. From this perspective it would be unthinkable for Khomeini even to suggest that the Perfect Man, who has completed the four journeys, could be anyone other than the prophets and Imams. The conflict surrounding the Sufi doctrine of the Perfect Man and the Twelver Shi‘i understanding of the Hidden Imam was recognised by one of the leading Persian Sufis of the late nineteenth century, Safi Ali Shah, who reconciled the difference by stating that true authority lies with the Twelfth Imam, to whom all obedience is due. However, if the gnostic has mystical contact with the Hidden Imam in occultation, the latter’s guiding function devolves practically on the *qutb* (or Sufi master). In other words, it is the Imam, in occultation, that is the Perfect Man and appears mystically in dreams or visions to lesser mortals.⁴⁶

A third perspective relating to the possibility of Khomeini completing the four journeys was highlighted in the West soon after the Islamic Revolution by *Time Magazine*, which named Khomeini their Man of the Year for 1979. In an article entitled “Man of the Year: Portrait of an Ascetic Despot,” it was observed:

[F]rom discussions with former students, talks with Western scholars who have visited Khomeini, profiles prepared by Western intelligence analysts, and the speeches and interviews he has given during this year on the world stage, it is possible to gain some insight into the Ayatullah’s thinking. First and foremost, all sources agree, he is an Islamic mystic who believes that God tells him directly how to apply the principles of the Koran and the Shari’aa (Islamic law) to life and politics.⁴⁷

Sharing this view are scholars such as Baqer Moin, who have no qualms claiming that Khomeini believed he had undergone all four of the journeys. Moin made this public in an obituary for Khomeini that he wrote for *The Independent* in 1989:

Khomeini’s strength and self-righteousness, which enabled him to withstand the enormous pressure of swimming against the tide, was on the basis of his mythical view that he had been through the four journeys sought by the Sufis, to reach absolute unity with God: first, “man to God” leaving behind carnal desire; “from God to God” annihilation in God; from “God to man” returning with Godly attributes to man; and finally from “man to man” merging with the people and God at the same time. Whoever has experienced these journeys becomes the Logos, the “Perfect Man”, the “centre of the universe”. ... What is certain about this contradictory personality was the charisma, sense of expediency and mysticism of a man who maintained that he was the people and God rolled into one, a belief which under certain circumstances could have led to his excommunication.⁴⁸

In his biography of Khomeini published in 1999, Moin was more circumspect, observing that the Ayatollah had never “openly” claimed to have completed the fourth journey. However, it is evident that Moin believed that Khomeini had indeed achieved this feat, noting the usual hesitancy of mystics to reveal their state. Moreover, he cited the opinion of Mehdi Hairi Yazdi, the son of a former student of Khomeini, who was of the opinion that Khomeini had reached the conclusion of the mystical

The Legacy of Khomeini's Interest in Irfan

Scholars agree that the tradition of *'irfan* had a profound impact on Khomeini, who continued to write on the theme.⁵⁰ Moreover, during the 1940s he even held his own classes on *'irfan*, which were restricted to a few select individuals that would later become leading figures in the revolutionary movement and the creation of the Islamic Republic.⁵¹ Although Khomeini subsequently started to focus on other areas of teaching, particularly ethics (*akhlaq*), scholars have recognised that the legacy of *'irfan* and its imperative of social engagement remained with him. During the 1930s and 1940s, he was linked (albeit tangentially) to a number of cases that resisted Reza Shah's reforms. Although Martin claims "he was not ... notably activist,"⁵² it is possible that as a junior cleric Khomeini felt obliged not to overstep the mark and toe the more quiescent line adopted by more senior clerics. Nevertheless, there is much truth in Algar's observation that the "early and intense cultivation of *hikmat* and *'irfan* should not be regarded as a passing episode, for it contributed powerfully to the formation of his total persona as religious and political leader."⁵³

The events of Khomeini's life in the 1960s and into the 1970s, and his unflinching opposition to the Pahlavi regime in particular, have been copiously documented in a number of works. With the success of the Islamic Revolution and the institutionalisation of the *velayat-e faqih* (guardianship of the jurist), some would argue that the *'irfani* imperative had yielded its logical conclusion. Moin, for example, rightly argued that a *faqih* could not claim a legislative right (which according to Khomeini was the prerogative of the prophets having completed the four journeys). However, Moin used the term *wilayat-i irfani* ("mystical guardianship") to describe how Khomeini believed the jurist had "power over the precepts of religion, even to the point of suspending them, which is exactly what he did in 1987."⁵⁴ According to Moin, "This view clearly contradicts the orthodox view of Islam in which the divine rules cannot be tampered with."⁵⁵ His reference to events in 1987–1988 reflects what Said Arjomand terms "the Constitutional Crisis of the 1980s and Khomeini's Second Revolution,"⁵⁶ in which the full extent of power that the Islamic government could exercise was revealed. Khomeini observed:

Government is a branch of Muhammad's absolute vice-gerency, and is one of the first precepts of Islam. It takes precedence over all religious practices such as prayer, fasting or the hajj pilgrimage. ... I openly say that the government can stop any religious law if it feels that it is correct to do so ... the ruler can close or destroy the mosques whenever he sees fit ... the government can prohibit anything having to do with worship or otherwise if [these things] would be against the interests of the government.⁵⁷

This declaration should not be considered a major innovation in Khomeini's thought, as he had criticised the constitution of the nascent Islamic Republic in 1980, which perhaps did not sufficiently reflect his own views regarding the extent of *velayat*.⁵⁸ At the heart of Khomeini's declaration is the desire to protect and preserve the interests of Islamic government. If precedents are needed to legitimise such a position (as many observers considered this an innovation, tantamount to heresy),⁵⁹ the concept of *darurat* or necessity provides a way for the exercise of temporary expedient measures.⁶⁰ The call for the establishment of Islamic government had been given by Khomeini when

he was resident in exile in Iraq back in the 1960s and 1970s, and it was the preservation of this primary goal that legitimised his (in)famous declaration of 1987–1988. Although *darurat* is a little-discussed concept in the Shi'i tradition, preservation of the Islamic government might have been considered a self-evident necessity, even by those who had little knowledge of the esoteric Islamic tradition so avidly studied by Khomeini as a young man. But some scholars (such as Moin) linked this declaration to the four journeys, and others stated that it is the best manifestation of “the hidden influence of the *irfan* tradition.”⁶¹

'Irfan in Khomeini's Poetry

Throughout his life, Khomeini had a deep affection for Persian poetry, which includes a rich vein of mystical verses. Indeed, the popularity of classical Persian poetry has transcended continents, as it has been frequently observed that during the 1990s the bestselling poet in the United States was Rumi.⁶² Indications of Khomeini's inclination for poetry appeared in his early years at Qum in the 1920s,⁶³ and he started to compose his own verses presumably at the same time. Some of these have been preserved, and they reveal Khomeini's mystical sentiments⁶⁴ and political concerns.⁶⁵ The fact that he also littered his prose Arabic works with verses penned by Persian mystical masters is again indicative of his predilection for the poetic tradition.⁶⁶

But Khomeini's prose work by far dominated his literary output, and the explicitly '*irfani*' element diminished over time to be replaced by ethics, jurisprudence (*fiqh*) and politics. With a few exceptions,⁶⁷ this trend continued during the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s after the success of the Islamic Revolution. It came as a surprise – perhaps even a shock – when soon after Khomeini's death, Iranians learnt of a publication entitled *Bada-yi 'ishq* (*The Wine of Love*), which was a collection of twenty-three of his *ghazals*.⁶⁸ Traditionally, the *ghazal* was used by Sufi poets to express sentiments of love for God, and non-Sufis had used the genre to convey their desires for a more secular beloved. The most celebrated Iranian composer of *ghazals* in the academic and popular imagination is Hafez of Shiraz (d. 1390), whose *ghazals* continue to evince a range of interpretations; from those who understand his praise of wine and the young serving boy in a literal sense to those who see them metaphorically.⁶⁹

The literary merit of Khomeini's *ghazals* is beyond the scope of this article,⁷⁰ a sour subject matter is Khomeini's own consideration of '*irfan*' and how, and if, this affected his world view. What is worthy of consideration is a letter (included as a preface to *Bada-yi ishq*) written by Khomeini to his daughter-in-law, who instigated the Ayatollah to compose the *ghazals*, in which he discusses mystical experience. Written in the final months of his life, the letter reflected on a mis-spent youth, and Khomeini admitted candidly that “with all of its pages ‘The Four Journeys’ detained me from the journey to the Friend, and ‘The [Meccan] Openings’ yielded no opening, and ‘The Bezels of Wisdom’ offered no wisdom.”⁷¹ This apparent denial of having experienced anything mystical is subsequently reconfirmed in Khomeini's *ghazals*:

*The Asfar and Shifa of Ibn Sina did not solve
Our difficulty, in spite of all of their profundity and deep discussions.*⁷²

And again in another *ghazal*:

*Release me from these countless pains,
From a heart cut in pieces and a breast [pierced like] a kebab.
[My] life has passed in sorrow due to separation from the Friend's face,
I am a bird in a fire and a fish out of water.
I had no share of mystical pleasure (hali na-shud) for all of [my] pain and life,
Old age has come, engulfed in inertia after youth.
I got nothing from the lessons and discussions in the seminary,
Who can reach the ocean from this mirage?
Whatever I learnt and whatever page I turned
Was nothing but veil after veil.*⁷³

This example is typical of most of the *ghazals* in Khomeini's collection, which in general reflect a disappointment that the Friend has remained absent during Khomeini's lifetime, so that it is only with death that the meeting will finally occur.⁷⁴

*The end of [my] life is coming, but the Friend has not yet come!
My story has reached a conclusion, but this pain has no end.
The chalice of death is at hand, and I never even saw a chalice of wine.
The years have flown by me, and I have still to feel the sweetheart's gentleness.*⁷⁵

Such verses stand in stark contrast to the rapturous and ecstatic verses of Hafez, who brazenly declared,

*Hair dishevelled, perspiring, smiling, drunk,
[Her] shirt rent open, singing, glass in hand,
With her challenging eyes and mocking lips,
She sat down at my pillow last-night at midnight
And leaning over me, in a sad voice
She whispered, "O my old lover! Are you asleep?"*⁷⁶

It is worth considering whether Khomeini's regret at the Friend's absence should be accepted at face value. That is to say, are there any valid reasons for supposing that Khomeini may have experienced something of a mystical nature in his lifetime, but was reluctant to reveal this? Was Khomeini attempting to stifle the veneration that some felt for the leader of the Islamic Revolution that for many observers resembled a form of untrammelled fanaticism? Or was Khomeini, in the last months before his death, being completely truthful, because as an old man approaching the meeting with his maker, he had nothing to lose and less to hide?

Khomeini's *ghazals* bear a certain imprint of one of the major themes found in Hafez's *diwan*; namely, a categorical refusal to accept the validity of other individuals and groups to claims of ultimate truth. Hafez regarded ascetics, Sufis, philosophers and legal scholars as hypocrites who desired "to set themselves up as guardians, judges, and examples of moral rectitude."⁷⁷ Instead, he praised those who were on the margins of society – who did not hide their sins but were honest in their endeavours (whether worldly or otherwise). These were the beggars, the debauch (*rind*) and the *qalandars*. The same feature occurs in Khomeini's *ghazals* with regularity, begging the question of

just who could be a legitimate guide, if not the very same *qalandars*. For Khomeini, the issue was not related to the promotion of non-Islamic morality, but the condemnation of what he viewed as hypocrisy:

*We are at war with the Sufi, the Gnostic and the dervish,
We are in dispute with the philosophy of systematic theology
We have fled from the seminary and escaped from the people
We have been ostracised by the wise and shunned by the common.*⁷⁸

Khomeini's ghazals reflect his desire for an intimate encounter with God, and it is this meeting that informed much of his writing from the 1930s onwards. There is a considerable consistency in Khomeini's mystical works, but conclusive evidence regarding his own completion of the four journeys is lacking. It appears far more likely that Khomeini's '*irfani*' tendencies remained purely theoretical, and in this fashion were able to remain within the normative framework of Twelver Shiism. This does not mean that he denied the possibility of mystical encounters, but it appears likely that Khomeini's belief was that only the prophets and Imams could complete the four journeys. A final point is that Khomeini's '*irfan*' reflects a trend that has been witnessed in many locations in the traditional heartlands of Islam. That is, whereas Sufi activity tended to be focused within orders, the twentieth century witnessed a dramatic increase in "intellectual Sufism," which was assisted with the increase of publications of Sufi and '*irfani*' works. Khomeini's own spiritual quest and descriptions of the mystical journey are divorced from discussions of ecstasy and ritualistic practices. Indeed, ecstatic statements are rejected as imperfections, and it is the sober and reflective speculative '*irfan*' that is endorsed. This was a message that was more appropriate for the modernising Iran of the twentieth century, and is worthy of comparison with developments in "Salafi-Sufism."⁷⁹ The development of Salafi-Sufism is a form of Sufism that emphasises ethics and inner purity, rather than focusing on mystical rapture at the meeting with God. It is typified in some Egyptian Salafi circles that selectively appropriate the works of great medieval masters such as Abū Hamid al-Ghazālī.⁸⁰

¹ See Frederick de Jong and Bernd Radtke (eds.), *Islamic Mysticism Contested: Thirteen Centuries of Controversies and Polemics* (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 1999).

² On which, see Alexander Knysh, *Ibn Arabi in the Later Islamic Tradition: The Making of a Polemical Image in Medieval Islam* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1999).

³ Said Amir Arjomand, "Religious Extremism (Ghuluww), Sufism, and Sunnism in Safavid Iran (1501–1722)", *Journal of Asian Studies*, 15 (1), (1981), 1–35.

- [4](#) 'Irfan refers to the intellectual approach to mystical questions of an epistemological and ontological nature. Although Sufism may also incorporate 'irfani approaches, it also includes specific rituals (which proponents of 'irfan regarded with distaste) and is often considered to be more of a populist nature.
- [5](#) On Mulla Sadra, see Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "Mulla Sadra and his Teachings," in Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Oliver Leaman (eds.), *History of Islamic Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 643–662; Leonard Lewisohn, "Sufism and the School of Isfahan" in Leonard Lewisohn and David Morgan (eds.), *The Heritage of Sufism*, vol. iii (Oxford: Oneworld, 1999), pp. 63–134; Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "The School of Isfahan" in M. M. Sharif (ed.), *A History of Muslim Philosophy*, vol. ii (Weisbaden: Harrassowitz, 1996), pp. 904–961.
- [6](#) For an example of Usuli thought compared with the other major Twelver Shi'i school, the Akhbaris, see Robert Gleave, *Inevitable Doubt: Two Theories of Shi'i Jurisprudence* (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2000).
- [7](#) On Sabzawari, see Mehdi Mohaghigh and Toshihiko Izutsu (trans.), *The Metaphysics of Sabzawari* (Delmar: New York, 1977). It is not insignificant that one of Sabzawari's disciples, Mirza 'Ali Akbar Yazdi, was one of Khomeini's first teachers in Qum. See Hamid Algar, "Imam Khomeini, 1902–1962: The Pre-Revolutionary Years", in Burke and Lapidus (eds.), *Islam, Politics and Social Movements* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988), p. 268.
- [8](#) Vanessa Martin, *Creating an Islamic State* (London: I.B. Tauris), p. 33.
- [9](#) Baqer Moin, *Khomeini* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1999), p. 46.
- [10](#) Franklin Lewis, *Rumi, Past and Present, East and West* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2000), p. 555. The kind of opposition faced by Khomeini in the 1920s and 1930s continued into the 1940s and 1950s, as 'Allama Tabataba'i experienced the same difficulties teaching the same texts on 'irfan in Qum. See Hamid Algar, "'Allama Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Tabataba'i: Philosopher, Exegete, and Gnostic," *Journal of Islamic Studies*, 17 (3), (2006), p. 334.

[11](#) Algar, “Imam Khomeini, 1902–1962: The Pre-Revolutionary Years”, p. 269.

[12](#) *Tafsir dua–yi sahar*, translated from Arabic into Persian by Ahmad Fihri (Tehran: Nihzar-i Zanan: 1359/1980).

[13](#) See Reynold A. Nicholson’s chapter entitled “The Perfect Man” in his *Studies in Islamic Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1921), pp. 77–142, in which he investigates the concept according to al-Jili; see also William Chittick, “The Perfect Man as the Prototype of the Self in the Sufism of Jamī,” *Studia Islamica*, 49 (1979–1980), pp. 137–157.

[14](#) For a detailed discussion of the Perfect Man, see Masataka Takeshita, *Ibn ‘Arabi’s Theory of the Perfect Man and its Place in the History of Islamic Thought* (Tokyo: Institute for the Study of Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa, 1987).

[15](#) *Misbah al-Hidayat ila al-khilafat wal-walayyat* (Arabic text and Persian translation by Ahmad Fihri), (Tehran: Paygham-i azadi, 1360/1981).

[16](#) The term “Akbarian” refers to Ibn ‘Arabi, who is also known as the al-Shaykh al-Akbar (or “greatest shaykh”).

[17](#) Alexander Knysh, “‘Irfan Revisited: Khomeini and the Legacy of Islamic Mystical Philosophy”, *Middle East Journal* 46 (4), (1992), p. 365.

[18](#) For the way in which the presences were understood by the first few generations of Ibn Arabi’s followers, see William Chittick, “Five Divine Presences: From al-Qunawi to al-Qaysari”, *Muslim World*, 80 (2), (1982), pp. 107–128. Khomeini’s discussion of the presences is far less elaborate or sophisticated in his section on the four journeys.

[19](#) Mulla Sadra was not the first to discuss the four journeys. They are mentioned in passing by Husayn Wa'iz Kashifi in his *Futuwwat nama-yi Sulṭani*, M. J. Mahjub (ed.), (Tehran: Bunyad-i farhang-i Iran, 1971), p. 245.

[20](#) Moin, *Khomeini*, p. 43.

[21](#) *Misbah al-Hidayat*, Arabic, p. 207; Persian, pp. 208–209.

[22](#) *Ibid.*, Arabic, p. 204; Persian, p. 206.

[23](#) For a discussion of these kinds of ecstatic utterances, see Carl Ernst, *Words of Ecstasy in Sufism* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1985).

[24](#) *Misbah al-Hidayat*, Arabic, p. 207; Persian, p. 209.

[25](#) *Ibid.*, Arabic, p. 204; Persian, p. 206.

[26](#) For Junayd see Ali Hassan Abdel-Kader, *The Life, Personality and Writings of al-Junayd* (London: Luzac, 1976). Junayd's complicated and intricate doctrine of annihilation (*fana'*) and annihilation of annihilation are contained in his own letters (which are included in Abdel-Kader's book, pp. 152–174).

[27](#) *Misbah al-Hidayat*, Arabic, p. 204; Persian, p. 206.

[28](#) *Ibid.*, Arabic, p. 207; Persian, p. 209.

[29 Ibid.](#), Arabic, pp. 205, 208; Persian, pp. 207, 209–210.

[30 Ibid.](#), Arabic, p. 205; Persian, p. 206.

[31 Ibid.](#), Arabic, p. 208; Persian, p. 209.

[32 Ibid.](#), Arabic, p. 211; Persian, p. 212.

[33](#) Another scholar for whom Khomeini uses this term is Aqa Muhammad Rida Qumsha'i, who briefly taught Shahabadi (see Martin, *Creating an Islamic State*, p. 32).

[34](#) *Misbah al-Hidayat*, Arabic; p. 212; Persian, p. 212.

[35](#) For more on this subject, see Michel Chodziekick, *The Seal of the Saints: Prophecy and Sainthood in the Doctrine of Ibn Arabī*, translated by L. Sherrard (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1993).

[36](#) Algar, "Imam Khomeini", p. 270.

[37](#) See Mehdi Ha'eri Yazdi, *Knowledge by Presence* (Tehran: Cultural Studies and Research Institute, 1982).

[38](#) Email correspondence, dated 8 June 2011.

[39](#) Knysh, “*Irfan Revisited*”, p. 371.

[40](#) *Ibid.*, p. 368.

[41](#) Knysh observes that “it seems likely that he adopted a number of ascetic practices ... renunciation of worldly delights and desires, self-imposed poverty, scrupulous discernment of the ‘lawful’ and ‘forbidden’”. “*Irfan Revisited*”, p. 634. All scholars mention Khomeini’s ascetic persona, and his admiration for like-minded clerics, such as Mudarris. Khomeini’s repudiation of wealth and worldly attachments was a theme that has been highlighted by the Islamic Republic since his death. When I visited Jamaran (Khomeini’s residency in Tehran) which receives visitors from around the world, a guide described how Khomeini had received Eduard Schevardnadze, then the foreign minister of the Soviet Union, in a small antechamber (rather than a plush meeting room), where they drank a simple glass of tea together.

[42](#) Algar, ““Allama Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Tabatabai”, p. 330.

[43](#) *Ibid.*, p. 331. Algar assumes that these are the practical rituals that were adopted by Tabataba’i.

[44](#) Martin, *Creating an Islamic State*, p. 39.

[45](#) This was discussed by Aziz Nasafi, a thirteenth-century Persian Sufi who analysed many of the themes that were also present in the *wujūdī* worldview. For his understanding of the Perfect Man, and there being only one at any one moment, see Lloyd Ridgeon, *Azīz Nasafī* (Richmond: Curzon Press, 1998), p. 176.

[46](#) See Lloyd Ridgeon, *Sufi Castigator* (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 15. For the correlation between the Twelfth Imam and the Sufi concept of the Perfect Man, see Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Tabataba'i, *Shi-ite Islam*, Seyyed Hossein Nasr (trans.), (Albany: SUNY Press, 1975), p. 114. His comments in *The Kernel of the Kernal* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2003) are also significant, for he witnesses the concrete manifestation of the Divine Names and Attributes in the world of existence, and the “reality of the Imam is the same as the Names and Attributes of God” (p. 109).

[47](#) *Time*, “Man of the Year: Portrait of an Ascetic Despot”, p. 15.

[48](#) Baqer Moin, *The Independent*, 5 June 1989.

[49](#) Moin, *Khomeini*, p. 51. Unfortunately, Moin does not say how this information was obtained.

[50](#) These works included commentaries on several texts that were composed by Ibn Arabi's followers, including al-Qaysari's own commentary on Ibn Arabi's *Fusus al-hikam*, and al-Fanari's *Misbah al-Uns* which was a commentary on *Miftah al-Qayb*, a work by Ibn Arabi's leading disciple, Sadr al-Din Qunawi. For full details of these commentaries of Khomeini see Knysh, “*Irfan* Revisited”, p. 375, n.1.

[51](#) One of these, Murtaza Mutahhari, was to write a book entitled *al-Insan al-Kamil*, in which he describes the Perfect Man from the perspective of the philosophers, the Sufis (as opposed to the gnostics such as Ibn Arabi) and “normative” Shiism. This work was nowhere near as sophisticated as Khomeini's treatment of *'irfan* and the Perfect Man because Mutahhari's populist work was intended for a very different readership. See Murtaza Mutahhari, *Perfect Man*, translated by Aladdin Pazargadi (Tehran: Foreign Department of Bonyad Be'that, n.d.).

[52](#) Martin, *Creating an Islamic State*, p. 30.

[53](#) Algar, “Imam Khomeini”, p. 270. Other scholars do not recognise the ethical and political

implications of *Misbah al-Hidayat* and the ‘*irfan*’ tradition. For example, Ervand Abrahamian in *Khomeinism: Essays on the Islamic Republic* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1993) states that Khomeini’s first political tract was *Kashf al-asaar* (1943). *Misbah al-Hidayat* is not mentioned at all in his book.

[54](#) Moin, *Khomeini*, p. 296.

[55](#) *Ibid.*

[56](#) Said Amir Arjomand, “Authority in Shiism and Constitutional Developments in the Islamic Republic of Iran”, in Rainer Brunner and Werner Ende (eds.), *The Twelver Shia in Modern Times: Religious Culture and Political History* (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2001), p. 309.

[57](#) Cited in *Middle East International*, no. 317, 23 January 1988, p. 18.

[58](#) Imam Khomeini, *Islam and Revolution I: Writings and Declarations* (ed., trans. Hamid Algar), (London: Mizan Press, 1986), p. 342.

[59](#) Godfrey Jansen, “Khomeini’s Heretical Delusions of Grandeur”, *Middle East International*, no. 317, 23 January, 1988, pp. 18–19. This statement in which Khomeini claimed that government has the authority to abrogate Islam’s basic pillars, according to Jansen, “has no basis whatsoever in the Quran and is an artificial construct by Khomeini which he tailored to fit his own personal ambitions”. [Ibid.](#)

[60](#) Y. Linaut de Bellefonds, “Darurat” *EI2*, vol. ii, 1965, pp. 163–164, who observes that the concept is “almost exclusively used” in the Shafi’i Sunni school.

[61](#) Martin, *Creating an Islamic State*, p. 41.

- [62](#) This is based on a cover article in the *Christian Science Monitor* (25 November 1925).
- [63](#) Moin, *Khomeini*, p. 29.
- [64](#) Marin, *Creating an Islamic State*, p. 32.
- [65](#) Algar, “Imam Khomeini”, p. 275.
- [66](#) See, for example, *Misbah al-Hidayat*, p. 203.
- [67](#) See Khomeini’s “Lectures on Surat al-Fatiha” broadcast in 1979–1980. These have been translated into English and published by Hamid Algar, *Islam and Revolution: Writings and Declarations* (London: Mizan Press, 1981), pp. 363–434.
- [68](#) *Bada-yi ishq* (Tehran: Sida wa sima-yi jumhuri-yi Islami-yi Iran, 1368/1989–90). All translations from *Bada-yi ‘ishq* in this article are my own. An English translation of the *ghazals* has been made by Muhammad G. Legenhausen: www.rkhomeini.org/eBook/dispContents.cfm?book_id=133&start_page=0. A further eight *ghazals* (written in the last two years of Khomeini’s life) were published under the title *Sabu-yi- ishq* (*The Pitcher of Love*). These have been translated by Muhammad G. Legenhausen, and appear on the same website given previously.
- [69](#) Compare the work of Khomeini’s student Murtaza Mutahhari. *Tamashagah-i raz* (Tehran: Intisharat-i Islami, 1980), which views Hafez as a mystic, with that of Ehsan Yarshater, “Hafez: An Overview”, *Encyclopedia Iranica* (15 December 2002, retrieved from <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/hafez-i>), who considers that the poet also wrote much that pertains to the sensory world.

[70](#) Those in Iran who disliked Khomeini and everything the Islamic Republic came to represent were not impressed by his poetry. For more on this, see Michael Fischer and Mehdi Abedi, *Debating Muslims: Cultural Dialogues in Postmodernity and Tradition* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990). See Appendix iii, “The Imam’s Blasphemystic Ghazal”, pp. 451–454. The poems have been severely criticised by some: “The poetry was a poor imitation of Hafez and other mystic poets, often awkwardly and inconsistently applying conventionalized imagery” (Fischer and Abedi, *Debating Muslims*, p. 451). In fairness to Khomeini, he stated that he had never possessed a talent for composing poetry (*Bada-yi ishq*, p. 15).

[71](#) *Bada-yi ishq*, p. 11. “The Four Journeys” (*Asfar a-arba’a*) refers to the book by Mulla Sadra; “The Meccan Openings” (*Futuhāt al-Makkiya*) and “The Bezels of Wisdom” (*Fusus al-hikam*) are perhaps the two most famous of Ibn ‘Arabi’s writings.

[72](#) *Bada-yi ishq*, p. 43.

[73](#) *Bada-yi ishq*, p. 49.

[74](#) See, for example, the *ghazals* in *Bada-yi ishq*, pp. 33, 41.

[75](#) *Bada-yi ishq*, p. 25. A similar sentiment is expressed in another *ghazal*:

*I followed all those of the heart, who head music, who had states
But no music at the feast I heard of the beautiful waitress.*

(*Sabu-yi ishq*, see [note 68](#)).

[76](#) *Diwan-i Hafizz*, edited by P. N. Khanlari (Tehran, n.p., n.d), no. 22, p. 44.

[77](#) Ehsan Yarshater, “Hafez: An Overview” (15 December 2002, retrieved from <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/hafez-i>).

[78](#) *Bada-yi ishq*, p. 53.

[79](#) It is of interest to compare Khomeini's *'irfan* with the ideas of other Sufi "reformers", such as the Kurdish Syrian Muhammad Sa'id Ramazan al-Būtī. See Andreas Christmann, "Transnationalising Personal and Religious Identities", in Catharina Raudvere and Leif Stenberg (eds.), *Sufism Today: Heritage and Tradition in the Global Community* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2009), pp. 31–47.

[80](#) See the forthcoming work of Richard Gauvain, *Salafi Ritual Purity: In the Presence of God* (London: Routledge).

9 The Divine, the People, and the Faqih

On Khomeini's Theory of Sovereignty

Behrooz Ghamari-Tabrizi

Ayatollah Khomeini's political philosophy is inevitably entwined with the history of the Iranian revolution. One can easily point to the troubled record of the Islamic Republic as the unmistakable realization of his theory of state and sovereignty, and thereby dismiss it as a failed theocratic intervention in the otherwise progressive secularization of politics in contemporary politics.

Although widely discussed for centuries in Shi'i seminaries, *velayat-e faqih* (guardianship of the jurist) remained an obscure scholastic notion outside the purview of Iranian political culture until the revolution of 1978–79. After its inclusion in the constitution of the Islamic Republic, *velayat-e faqih* became a key concept in the lexicon of Iranian politics. Despite the official designation of *velayat-e faqih* as the highest constitutional political office, its meaning and the scope of its authority continues to be debated in religious and other intellectual circles. After Khomeini's death in 1989 and in the absence of a charismatic leadership, questions about the accountability of the Supreme Leader, scope of his authority and sources of its legitimacy, relationship between and independence of the three branches of the government, relation between representative government and the wisdom of guardianship, religious obligations and sovereignty of the people, Divine will and the right of self-determination and other similar questions increasingly dominated the political discourse in Iran.

Many of these ambiguities in the concept of *velayat-e faqih* originate from abundant contradictory remarks in Khomeini's lifetime oeuvre. These contradictions point to the evolution of Khomeini's political philosophy over time. They also highlight the indeterminate nature of the postrevolutionary political order that casts the Islamic Republic more as a work in progress than the unfolding of an already existing blue print.

Khomeini did not follow the same political strategy throughout his six-decade-long religious and political career. Although there are important elements of continuity in his thought, most importantly his idea of comprehensiveness of Islam and the inseparability of religion and politics, his views of forms of governance and the role of clergy in political affairs changed dramatically. The transformation of Khomeini's political philosophy closely followed the changing theories of politics in different periods of Shi'i jurisprudence and theology.

Political Quietism: Leviathan and the Problem of Order

In 1922, Khomeini followed his mentor and one of the most influential sources of emulation, Ayatollah Haeri-Yazdi, to Qom. As one of the founders of the new seminary in Qom, Haeri exercised a great influence on his pupils, particularly in discouraging them from political activities. As a young cleric, Khomeini witnessed how Reza Shah's ambitious state-building project in the 1920s and 1930s had transformed Iranian society and limited the authority of religious institutions. Although there were rumors that Khomeini participated in anti-Reza Shah rallies,¹ by and large he respected his mentor's wisdom in avoiding politics during his studies.² Even when in 1928 a detachment of Reza

Shah's troops invaded the seminary in Qom and desecrated the holy shrine, Khomeini followed Ayatollah Haeri's *fatwa* (religious decree) in which he asked for calm and forbade his disciples to foment unrest.³

At the time, Haeri's words of caution on political engagement represented a dominant view in the seminaries. With the exception of a few high-ranking clerics, the clerical establishment was concerned more with defending the institution of clergy than asserting its political authority. Ayatollah Haeri represented a long-standing view that in the absence of the infallible Imam, the clergy has to afford moral guidance in society and act as exemplary ethical leaders untainted by the corruption of governance. Indeed, since the time of the Prophet and the question of his succession, Shi'i scholars viewed governance and religious guidance as two related but institutionally independent realms.

In his early writings, Khomeini followed the same hegemonic political philosophy with its four major characteristics: (1) During the time of occultation, all forms of governance are unjust and illegitimate; (2) The state is a necessary institution the main responsibility of which is to maintain peace and order; (3) The clergy acts as the custodian of the Prophetic tradition, the interpreter of the Divine laws, and the adviser of the ruler; (4) The legal source of governance is the *shariah* (Divine law), and all other legal injunctions (civic, criminal, and constitutional) outside the *shariah* are inherently devious.

Ayatollah Khomeini published his first major political treatise in 1943 and called it *Kashf-e Asrar* (*Revealing the Secrets*). The book is a thoroughly argued response to a pamphlet called *Asrar-e hezar saleh* (*Secrets of a Thousand Years*) written by Ali-Akbar Hakamizadeh, a former cleric who abandoned religious studies in Qom in the early 1930s to protest what he believed to be the dominance of superstition in the seminaries. Hakamizadeh became a known figure in Qom and later in Tehran, with strong affinities with anti-traditionalist intellectual circles around the journal *Homayun*, which he founded and edited in 1934. In his pamphlet, Hakamizadeh castigated the core principles of Shi'ism and the significance it gives to the clerical establishment. He questioned the central tenet of the Shi'i political philosophy that "erecting any government in the absence of the infallible Imam is invalid." He also challenged the juridical claims of the clergy that "the only official laws that command our obedience are those based on the *shari'a*." He emphasized the supremacy of reason as the only guide toward a just society, and ridiculed the clergy for their superstitious beliefs. He lambasted foundational features of Shi'ism, from the value of prayer to the wisdom of Imamate, from the interpretive authority of the clergy to the limits of their juridical power in modern societies.⁴

Khomeini rebutted Hakamizadeh and his intellectual associates without mentioning their names or making any direct reference to Hakamizadeh's text. In his first political treatise, Khomeini issued scathing criticism of Reza Shah and his secularist attempts to rein in the authority of the clergy and limit the scope of its judicial power. But his admonition of the Pahlavi court remained within the confines of the dominant Shi'i political discourse, and Khomeini thus did not call for the overthrow of monarchy or the clergy to assume political power. The reason that the clergy recognizes the legitimacy of the sacred law, Khomeini argued, is the inherent imperfection of human faculty of Reason: "Lawmakers are like any other human beings, they are licentious and implacable; they are deceitful and cunning; they give priority to their individual interests over the interests of others."⁵ On many occasions in the book, he reminded his readers that the responsibility of the clergy was to "promote justice," "lead prayers," "learn the Qur'an and the Prophetic traditions," and "spread the word of God."⁶

Khomeini wrote his treatise during a time when the clergy no longer shied away from direct political advocacy. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, with the rapidly increasing influence of colonial powers in Iran, many influential Ayatollahs exceeded their seminarian responsibilities and spoke out against the Qajar rulers and their incompetence in defending the nation against the colonial onslaught. The single event that marked this historical shift in the clerical political engagement was the protest against the Tobacco Régie. In March 1890, the Qajar King, Naser al-Din Shah (1831–1896), granted a full monopoly of production, sales, and export of Iranian tobacco for fifty years to a British citizen, Major G. F. Talbot. After protests broke out against the concession and with pressures from the tobacco merchants, Ayatollah Mirza Hasan Shirazi issued a one-line *fatwa* stating that “the use of tobacco and its products in any form is a declaration of war against the Hidden Imam.” Even the residents of the king’s palace observed the *fatwa*. Only a month later, in January 1892, the Shah was forced to annul the contract. Shirazi promptly issued a second decree calling the use of tobacco permissible. With this intervention, as Vali Nasr observes, “the Shi‘a ulama [became] Iran’s first line of defense and loudest spokesmen against colonialism.”⁷ This episode was only an overture to the central and lasting role the clergy played in the Constitutional Revolution of 1905–1906.

Despite such politicization of the clergy, in his first political treatise, Khomeini refrained from advocating the establishment of a clerical Islamic state. He supplemented every instance of his critique of the monarch with a reminder that the *faqih* (“the learned jurist”) should not rule. Governance was not among the responsibilities of the *faqih*. Throughout the text, Khomeini emphasized that the *faqih*’s goal is not to unseat the king, but to guide him to have in mind the interests of Islam and the good of the nation: “Not only is it permissible to enter the destructive organization of dictatorship to prevent corruption and to promote the betterment of the country and the people, but sometimes it is even obligatory.” Even the infallible Imams, he wrote, assisted unjust rulers in order to protect peace and shield their communities from chaos and violence.⁸

One can easily classify *Kashf-e Asrar* as a treatise against reformist tendencies in Shi‘i jurisprudence, particularly as advocated by Shari‘at Sangalaji (1890–1944), a respected cleric.⁹ Sangalaji was greatly influenced by Salafism without the literalist tendencies that motivated it. Sangalaji refuted the need for sacred intermediaries and viewed the practice of *taqlid* (following the edicts of a source of emulation) as a betrayal of reason. He considered subscription to the notion of infallibility, with the exception of the Prophet, to be a form of polytheism (*shirk*). For Sangalaji, the Qur’an did not require sanctioned interpreters, and the clergy had no legitimate claim to a privileged access to its meaning. The Qur’an was intelligible to every person, and encourages each person to develop the ability to comprehend its message and apply it to her or his particular circumstance.¹⁰

Earlier during the Constitutional Revolution of 1905–1906, one could observe a keen recognition among influential sources of emulation of new political ideas outside the Shi‘i juridical frame. But now, with Reza Shah’s massive assault on the clergy, Sangalaji’s rationalism and his critique of Shi‘i jurisprudence forced the seminarians to defend the traditions that afforded legitimacy to their institution. Khomeini was no exception. Whereas Sangalaji posited that the Qur’an only shows the general ways of being, Khomeini considered the sacred law to be the only source of governance. In his first political treatise, Khomeini followed the anti-constitutional position of Sheikh Fazlollah Nouri, who called the very notion of legislative power blasphemous. The constitutionalists condemned Nouri to death, and he was hanged in 1909 on the charges of treason and sedition. But his ideas about the comprehensiveness of the *shariah* and unchanging character of Islamic laws gained more currency during the reign of Reza Shah. In his critique of Sangalaji, Khomeini revived Nouri by emphasizing the omnipresence of Islam impervious to temporal changes and cultural differences.

He wrote:

Our contemporary religion is no different from the religion of the past. Our religion has always been the commands of the Qur'an and the Prophet of Islam. ... Religious injunctions are the same as the demands of reason, with changing times it does not change. Two plus two is always four, injustice is always bad, oppression and cruelty has never been a virtue and it will never be.^{[11](#)}

The brief enthusiasm of the clergy during the Constitutional Revolution about political engagement and constitutionalism gave way during the early decades of the Pahlavi regime to the traditional "pious indifference to worldly politics."^{[12](#)} Even during the turbulent years of the nationalization of oil in the early 1950s, and the CIA-led coup against Mohammad Mosaddeq in 1953, Khomeini remained committed to this traditional view of politics, regarding the state as a profane sphere of injustice and prohibiting the clergy from taking a part in it. This was about to change in 1961 after the death of Ayatollah Boroujerdi, the undisputed Shi'i clerical authority of his generation.

Khomeini and the Rise of Political Islam

The departure of Boroujerdi as the sole source of emulation created a crisis of authority in the Shi'i seminaries. Although a great majority of high-ranking clerics respected Boroujerdi's directive to eschew politics, with his passing their desires to assert themselves in social and political arenas gradually surfaced. One year after Boroujerdi's death, a group of young clerics and religious intellectuals published a volume of collected essays linked in urging the clergy to step out of their seminary and engage actively with everyday concerns of the nation.^{[13](#)}

The contributors to the collection, many of whom would become leaders of the Islamic Revolution, argued that the clergy no longer held the kind of influence enjoyed during the Constitutional Revolution of 1905–1906. They called for serious reconsideration of the role of the clergy in social affairs, and proposed major restructuring of the Shi'i hierarchy and a move toward the recognition of multiple sources of emulation. This was a conspicuous reaction to the dominant position of Ayatollah Boroujerdi and his ability to steer the seminaries clear of politics. As the main proponent of decentralization, Ayatollah Taleqani argued that a centralized juridical school and uniformity in *fatawa* correspond neither to the history of Shi'i jurisprudence nor the interests of contemporary society. Different sources of emulation, he proposed, should meet regularly to discuss changes in society and consult with one another before issuing their opinions on social events.^{[14](#)}

Although he did not call for the rule of the clergy, in the same volume, Mehdi Bazargan – whom Khomeini appointed as the provisional prime minister after the 1979 revolution – criticized the clergy for being indifferent toward massive social changes and political affairs in Iran. He wrote that people bore certain expectations of the clergy and by failing to fulfill those expectations the latter would increasingly lose its relevance. As much as the clergy acted as a point of reference in religious matters, Bazargan asserted, it should also seek a place in the peoples' struggle against tyranny. Instead of "drowning themselves in esoteric issues in jurisprudence," they should think about matters that are relevant to the contemporary world.^{[15](#)}

A young disciple of Ayatollah Khomeini put forward one of the most unyielding critiques of the clerical status quo. Morteza Mutahhari, who would become the spokesman of the Revolutionary

Council in 1979, contributed two chapters to the book, both critical of the stagnation in the seminaries and dominance of the kind of populism among the clergy that fed on the ignorance of the masses ('*avam-zadegi*). Whereas Mutahhari highlighted the practice of *ijtihad* (interpretive reasoning) as one of the most important points of distinction between Shi'i and Sunni Islam, he criticized the high-ranking clerics for turning a practice that encourages reasoning and creative engagement with issues of the time into an invitation to "blind imitation." According to Mutahhari, the stagnation in the seminaries threatened to render the institution of clergy irrelevant in Iranian society.¹⁶ Although none of the authors of the book moved beyond conventional Shi'a political philosophy to call for clerical assumption of power, they all held that the clergy must assume an active role in social affairs.

This internal transformation of the seminaries coincided with the monarch's intensified effort to consolidate power after the 1953 coup and advance the authority of the state, particularly in the countryside, at the expense of the clergy. Alongside rhetoric casting the clergy as marginal to contemporary politics, the Shah began initiating reforms that would soon face serious resistance from Qom. First, in the fall of 1962, Prime Minister Alam introduced a new bill to the *majlis* (parliament) to change the Local Council Election Law. The new provisions eliminated Islam as the requisite religion of the candidates; allowed women suffrage; and permitted swearing on the "Holy Book," rather than exclusively the Qur'an, at the confirmation ceremony. The new law infuriated the clergy. Although a number of high-ranking clerics responded furiously to the revisions, it was Ayatollah Khomeini who emerged as its most vociferous detractor. In a telegram, he "kindly" asked the Shah to cancel "all state-sponsored programs which may lead to the undermining of the holy religion of the nation."¹⁷

In his first letter to the Shah, Khomeini used a formal and respectful language to convey his dissatisfaction with the new law. Here, he acted within the same old paradigm of clerical supervision of the monarch and his role in safeguarding the existing constitution. At the same time, Khomeini relentlessly wrote to other Ayatollahs in Qom, Kashan, and Shiraz, urging them to not remain silent about these clear violations of the constitution.¹⁸ As the grievances against the new law spread, the tone of Khomeini's letters became more aggressive and threatening. Nevertheless, at this stage he continued to define his role as a defender of the constitution and monarchy. Recognizing the depth of the crisis, the Shah acknowledged Khomeini's telegram and offered his assurances that he would not allow the institutionalization of any measures contradictory to the teachings of Islam. In response, Khomeini, although still deferential, wrote: "Our Muslim nation expects that your resolute order will compel Mr. Alam to respect the law of Islam and the constitution. Otherwise, in another open letter, I will be obliged to caution Your Majesty on other matters. *I ask the Great God to save our Muslim nations from civil strife and revolution.*"¹⁹ Facing the clergy's unprecedented political reaction, one month after its introduction to the *majlis* the prime minister withdrew the bill. Emboldened with the success of his campaign, Khomeini continued his attack and tried to persuade the Shah to sack Alam. He understood very well that the expansion of state power would increasingly restrict the social and economic base of the clergy. But despite these open confrontations, the fundamentals of Khomeini's political discourse remained unchanged, as he spoke primarily from the position of saving the monarchy rather than abolishing it.²⁰

In January 1963, the Shah announced new measures in what he viewed as the necessary steps toward the modernization of the country. The most significant of these measures were a general state-sponsored land reform and the restoration of the earlier defeated attempt for the extension of the right to vote for women. Unlike the earlier legislative path, calling the new measures the White Revolution, this time the Shah legitimized his reforms by calling for a national referendum.

The referendum became a rallying point around which Khomeini tried to unite the clergy against what he regarded as an open assault on Islam and clerical authority. The Shah tried to appease a number of high-ranking clerics by reassuring them that the White Revolution would contain communists and limit their influence. Although there was already a general sense of unease in the seminaries about what later came to be known as the Revolution of the Shah and the Nation, it was Khomeini who impelled the clergy to openly resist the reforms. He issued a statement declaring the Iranian New Year, March 20, 1963, a “national day of mourning.”²¹ Security forces stormed the seminary, killed and wounded many, burned the seminarians’ belongings and books, and ransacked their quarters. That day ended Khomeini’s commitment to saving the monarch from the wrongdoings of his advisers. He began a new period in his political thought. In a desperate telegram to Tehran’s *ulema*, he lamented:

Loyalty to the Shah means pillage, desecration of Islam, aggression against the rights of Muslims, violating the sanctity of centers of knowledge and wisdom. Loyalty to the Shah means ... the destruction of the clergy and the annihilation of the signs of prophecy. The respected gentlemen are aware that the foundations of Islam are threatened. The Qur‘an and religion are endangered. Given these circumstances, dissimulation [*taqiya*] is prohibited [*haram*], and voicing the truth obligatory [*vajeb*].²²

Although he had not yet formulated a new political theory, Khomeini embarked on a series of sermons and a campaign of letter writing to highlight the inherent political responsibilities of the clergy. He thought that the low rate of participation in the referendum showed a deep rift between the Shah and his subjects, but fell short of calling for his removal from power or the end of the institution of the monarchy altogether.²³

A number of high-ranking clerics registered their dissatisfaction with the White Revolution and the referendum. But it was only Ayatollah Khomeini who used this opportunity to enter the political scene and redefine the relationship between the clergy and the state. In a fiery speech on June 3, 1963, he called the Shah an agent of the Israeli Jews, and accused him of “carrying out the conniving plans, such as the equal rights of women and men and compulsory military draft of women, of the Baha’is.”²⁴ On the same day, an estimated 100,000 people marched toward the Shah’s palace in Tehran, chanting, “Death to the Dictator, Long Live Khomeini!” Two days later, the security forces stormed Khomeini’s home in Qom and arrested and transferred him to a prison in Tehran. Riots broke out in many towns and cities, and hundreds were killed.²⁵ Khomeini was released soon thereafter, and later exiled. But the most important result of these events was that he emerged as a revolutionary leader, a role he theorized into a new political philosophy during his early years of exile in Iraq.

In a meeting marking the sixteenth anniversary of the 1963 uprising, Khomeini reminisced that there was a time that being a political mullah was an aberration. When a mullah talked about politics, the *majlis*, the problems of the ordinary people, “even the community of *ulama* would say that this person is ‘political,’ thus useless!” But, he reiterated, the events of 1963 clearly demonstrated that a cleric cannot and should not stay clear of politics. Whatever we say in our sermons, Khomeini advised his fellow mullahs, was political: “To hold people responsible for their ethical and moral responsibilities is engagement with political matters.”²⁶

After the *majlis* ratified the Capitulation Law, which exempted American armed forces from being subject to the Iranian law, in October 1964, Khomeini intensified his political engagement. After

being released from prison, he delivered another sermon against the new law. He told an eager audience gathered in Qom that “the regime has sold the independence of the country and has shown in practice its servitude to America. Today is a national day of mourning.”²⁷ Continuing his ardent criticism of the regime and refusing to submit to the conditions the government had set for his freedom, he again used the occasion to redefine the relation between Islam and politics: “The entirety of Islam is politics; Islam is the origin of politics. I am not a mullah who sits here and plays with his prayer beads. I am not the Pope to deliver a sermon on Sundays and for the rest of my days ignore what happens around me.”²⁸ Other influential Ayatollahs offered tepid support to Khomeini’s assertion about the political essence of Islam. But for the most part, the clerical establishment remained within the old discursive boundaries and demanded the reinstatement of the clergy’s constitutional advisory role.

Khomeini and the Theory of Velayat-E Faqih

Khomeini began to reconsider his earlier commitment to the dominant Islamic theory of the state after he was forced into exile in 1964 – first to Turkey and soon thereafter to Iraq. Despite his own earlier scholarship and teaching topics in mysticism, gnostic spirituality, and philosophy he began to develop a reductionist view of Islam as politics.

He argued that the main objective of prophecy is to guide humanity toward the “establishment of a just society through the implementation of Divine laws.”²⁹ Khomeini found political expressions in all elements of religious practices, beliefs, rituals, ethics, and concerns of everyday life. Politics for Khomeini was no longer a sphere to which one decides whether to enter or not. Rather, he considered it to be a general context of all social life: “Islam is a political religion, every aspect of it is political, even worship.”³⁰ He argued that “piety in Islam means an invitation to politics, an invitation to governance; piety in Islam has no meaning outside politics.”³¹ In his first sermon in Najaf, he claimed:

The ratio of Qur’anic verses concerned with the affairs of society to those concerned with ritual worship is greater than a hundred to one. Of the approximately fifty sections of the corpus of *hadith* containing all the ordinances of Islam, not more than three or four sections relate to matters of ritual worship and the duties of man toward his Creator and Sustainer. A few more are concerned with questions of ethics, and all the rest are concerned with social, economic, legal, and political questions – in short, the gestation of society.³²

Khomeini thought that ending political quietism required revitalizing the *Usuli* doctrine and abandoning the spirit of the *Akhbari* school, which he believed had dominated Shi’i jurisprudence.³³ The *Akhbari* spirit, according to Khomeini, had forced *fiqh* to be concerned only with idiosyncratic matters of private life and marginalized the significance of *ijtihad*. As one of the young Ayatollahs in Najaf who was inspired by Khomeini’s critique, Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr, observed: “Step by step, rather than addressing social predicaments, *ijtihad* became an exercise in regulating the life of the private individual.”³⁴

By stressing the significance of *ijtihad*, Khomeini also highlighted the temporality of *fiqh*. Khomeini was aware that he could not substantiate a theory of the Islamic state on the basis of the guardianship of the jurist (*velayat-e faqih*) with exclusive reference to Qur’an and *hadith*. Although

one can find general references to the concept of *velayat-e faqih* in earlier discussions, there exists no consensus on the meaning, scope, and subject of guardianship. To advance his theory, he laid emphasis on the tradition of interpretive reasoning on the basis of changing circumstances against narrative reasoning on the basis of precedence. In the latter point lies one of the most important contributions of Khomeini in transcending the traditionalist views in Shi'i jurisprudence. Juridical sanctions correspond to particular social and historical moments within which they have been issued; thus, the necessity of the transformation of *fiqh* in response to changing social circumstances. Toward the end of his life, when he was asked what the most important element of his juridical thought was, Khomeini responded that it was the combination of "hermeneutical *ijtihad*" with "traditional *fiqh*."³⁵ The view that juridical edicts have only provisional significance increasingly became a centerpiece of Khomeini's conception of *velayat-e faqih*. With this hermeneutical move, Khomeini liberated himself from the dominant quietist views without questioning their validity during the period they were advocated.

In Najaf, on January 20, 1970, Khomeini launched a twelve-part lecture series on Islamic governance. Later published as *Velayat-e Faqih*, these lectures became the foundation of a new theory of state in which Khomeini for the first time advocated the assumption of political power as the religious obligation of the clergy. His new definition of *fiqh* as politics led him to propose that during the time of occultation, *fuqaha* (the plural of *faqih*, "jurist") bore the responsibility of forming an Islamic state. Khomeini argued that the *faqih* represented the Occulted Imam in his absence because he had the ultimate knowledge of Islamic law, as well as the authority to interpret it. Under the Islamic state, he asserted, the *faqih* practices the same authority and responsibility that the Prophet and the infallible Imams exercised. Thereby, "every person in society must submit to the declarations that the *faqih* issues in the interests of Muslims." All people, including other *fuqaha*, must conform to the demands of any just *faqih* who successfully establishes an Islamic state. After the establishment of the Islamic state, he contended, it is the person of the *faqih* who gives legitimacy to the ruling government.³⁶

He described the Islamic state as an exceptional regime incomparable to other contemporary forms of governance:

Neither is the Islamic government tyrannical nor is it absolute (*motlaqeh*). It is constitutional – constitutional not in the current sense of the word in which laws are enacted in accordance with the majority's opinion. It is constitutional only in so far as its rulers are inhibited by a collection of conditions set forth by the Qur'an and the Sunnah of the Prophet. It is those laws and ordinances that must be observed and executed. From this standpoint, Islamic government is the rule of Divine Law over the people.³⁷

On a number of occasions in his lectures, he reiterated that the essential difference between Islamic and other forms of government is in the absence of a legislative branch. Whereas under a constitutional monarchy or a republican government laws are written by a legislative body, legislation in an Islamic government belongs solely to the realm of the Almighty: "Under Islamic government, a simple planning body to implement the Divine Law will replace the legislative assembly."³⁸ He contended that the qualified *faqih* is religiously obliged to carry out responsibilities such as defending the nation, securing Muslims' economic interests, and upholding Islamic laws, even if he doubts his own abilities. Hence, he emphasized the Divine source of legitimacy of his proposed Islamic government.³⁹

Although he stressed the divinity of Islamic government as an extension of the rule of the Prophet, he also highlighted the contractual aspect of *velayat*. In a lecture called *velayat-e e'tebari* ("contractual guardianship"), he warned that one should not confuse the position and stature of the *ulema* with that of the infallible Imams and the Prophet: "*Velayat* means governance and administration of the country and the execution of the divine *shari'a* laws. ... Carrying out those responsibilities does not create a privileged position for the *faqih*, it does not raise him to a level above an ordinary human being."⁴⁰ This contractual guardianship, Khomeini stressed, is also '*uqala'ei* – meaning that it requires two sides to enter the contract using their faculty of reason. Despite such assertions, however, during the lectures he referred to the "nation" (*mellat*) or "people" (*mardom*) as those whose rights have been violated and are (like minors) in need of the protection and guardianship of the *faqih*.⁴¹ The seeming contradiction between contractual guardianship – which presupposes willing, rational actors – and his allegorical reference to the guardianship of the minor remains an important source of tension in interpretations of Khomeini's writing.

In his lectures, Khomeini proposed that his conception of the rule of the jurist is "self-evident" and consistent with earlier jurists' understanding of the *faqih's* role in society during the period of occultation. The idea of the guardianship of the *faqih* had never been disputed in the entire history of Shi'i jurisprudence; it is the scope of guardianship that has been the perpetual subject of debate. What distinguished Khomeini's conception was his attribution of absolute (*motlaqeh*) guardianship to the jurist, allowing the *faqih* to exercise during the time of occultation the same comprehensive authority over social, legal, economic, and political matters as the infallible Imams.

Historically, Shi'i scholars have discussed the question of the authority of the *faqih* with reference to three functions: 1) issuing of a decree (*al-ifta*); 2) litigation and verdict (*al-qada*); and 3) custodial affairs and guardianship (*al-umur al-hisbiya*). The question of *velayat* became a central concern of Shi'i scholars during the Safavid rule (1501–1722). But even the most influential scholars of the time, such as Mohaqqiq al-Karaki (d. 1530), never envisioned the jurist as the ruler.

In his lectures, Khomeini tried to situate himself in a long line of earlier scholars, such as Mullah Ahmad Naraqi (d. 1829), that were of the opinion that "the *fuqaha* are entitled to exercise all the worldly functions of the Prophet."⁴² He presented his case in many occasions as self-evident, dismissing the entire Shi'i political philosophy of precautionary dissimulation (*taqiya*)⁴³ as a fleeting aberration. Even Naraqi, who Khomeini credited as one of the great advocates of *velayat-e faqih*, never stressed the significance and necessity of the rule of the jurist as a political project. He wrote about the guardianship of the jurist, but also defended Mohammad Ali Shah of the Qajar Dynasty, despite the fact that he considered him a tyrant.⁴⁴ That is not to say that Khomeini failed to support his theory with strong textual-narrative evidence. He cautiously avoided the appearance of putting forward a *bid'at* ("innovation," "a case without precedence"), which has always been suspect in Shi'i scholarship. But it is through his logical reasoning that he made his case for the rule of the supreme jurist.

Khomeini's doctrine met with serious skepticism. His most vociferous critic was Ayatollah Kho'i, who insisted that *velayat-e faqih* was a contentious topic, and that the consensus among the *ulema* was and remained that it only applied to *hisbiyya* (custodial) affairs of minors and other tax and property transactions. Ayatollah Araki and Ayatollah Mohsen Hakim also stated that *velayat-e faqih* was limited to matters of custodianship, and had nothing to do with political sovereignty. Hakim accused Khomeini of situating himself in the position of the infallibles by calling on the people to sacrifice their lives and rise up against tyranny.⁴⁵

The Islamic Revolution and Khomeini's Republicanism

Khomeini's exile coincided with the rise of a new generation of Muslim intellectuals and militant activists inside the country. Although inspired by Khomeini's uncompromising position against the Shah, the new generation emerged from the outside of the seminaries. They were deeply influenced by the global left anti-imperialist politics, and borrowed with ease in their revolutionary discourse from Marx and Imam Ali, Franz Fanon, and Hussein. Their leading intellectual figures became increasingly critical of the entire institution of the clergy. Ali Shariati emerged as the most influential and prolific voice of this new generation.⁴⁶

Like Khomeini, Shariati viewed Islam as a theology of liberation, requiring a political language. He held the clergy responsible for turning religion into an instrument for the justification of tyranny, as Shi'ism became the official religion of the state during the Safavid Empire. Clerical establishment, he observed, had kept Shi'ism stagnant by making superstition and obscure private ritualistic matters into its central preoccupation. The institution of clergy, he declared, had emptied Islam from its revolutionary core.⁴⁷

In Qom, Najaf, and Mashhad, the Grand Ayatollahs were perturbed by Shariati's scathing censure of the clergy and what he called "Safavid Shi'ism." They asked the Shah and his secret police to stop what they called the spread of Shariati's poisonous words and deceptive books. They also, ironically, accused him of being a SAVAK collaborator whose mission was to destroy Islam from within. A long list of Ayatollahs lent their support to a petition to ban their followers from attending his lectures and issued *fatawa* condemning his heresy.⁴⁸ But conspicuously absent from the long list of petitioners was Ayatollah Khomeini. In 1977, acknowledging that he had read Shariati's books, Khomeini argued that "it is not now the right time for these things."⁴⁹ Khomeini saw similarities between his own and Shariati's revolutionary project. As an Ayatollah, obviously, he could not condone Shariati's indiscriminate denunciation of the clergy, but he shared the same frustration about the political quietism in the seminaries.

Although Khomeini borrowed from the anticolonial lexicon of the Iranian left in his declarations, speeches, and letters prior to his exile, this new language increasingly penetrated his sermons and writings during his residence in Najaf, as well. From chambers of the most revered Shi'i seminaries, Khomeini began to reach out to a new generation of Muslim revolutionaries that understood Islam as a blueprint of a utopian society based on justice and equality. Theirs was not a transmitted Islam, but a revolutionary ideology articulated by lay theologians and radical urban guerrillas. Khomeini realized that in order to connect with this new generation, he did not need to discuss al-Karaki's or Naraqi's revisionist interpretations of *velayat-e faqih*. Although having paradigmatic significance in the seminaries, these discussions seemed too scholastic and obscure for a generation whose mission was to end the dictatorship of the Shah and influence of his imperialist supporters.

One may attribute Khomeini's transformation to his instrumental effort to remain relevant, and view it as a mere calculated appropriation of the political discourse of the left. But, as Daniel Brumberg observed, "Khomeini did not merely 'appropriate' the ideas of the Islamic Left at an opportune moment; instead, through a protracted process of ideological diffusion and absorption that unfolded in tandem with his evolving biography, he indirectly imbibed these ideas in a manner often more unconscious than calculated. As a result, Khomeini developed *genuinely* contradictory visions of authority."⁵⁰

Almost immediately after his arrival in Najaf, representatives of different student organizations from Europe and the United States visited Khomeini. The future cadres of the Islamic Revolution,

leaders of Islamic student associations such as Ibrahim Yazdi, Abolhasan Bani Sadr, Sadeq Qotbzadeh, and Mostafa Chamran, held regular meetings and communications with Khomeini. They helped Khomeini see himself as a part of a larger anticolonial struggle around the globe and express his political discourse in a language that was directly inspired by Shariati's liberation theology. Issues of social justice and anticolonialism increasingly emerged as a central feature of Khomeini's messages. A new political lexicon entered Khomeini's declarations: sovereignty of the people, independence, representative government, and the right of self-determination. He began his message to *hajj* pilgrims in February 1971 by lamenting that "the wicked claw of colonialism has penetrated into the depths of the Muslims' lands. They have drained our wealth and resources and poisoned even the most remote villages of our soil with their corrupt culture. ... We must unite on the path to independence and pledge allegiance to uproot the cancerous colonialism."⁵¹ He then called on the university students to resist the "inhuman methods" of the regime to suppress their demand for justice. Revisiting his earlier denunciation of the White Revolution, he emphasized nearly a decade later its failure to deliver the very projects of which he was critical:

This shameful, bloody revolution, the so-called "white revolution," has brought more misery to our peasants and farmers. Now, most towns and villages, have no access to a health clinic, a doctor or medicine. There exists no sign of schools, public baths, or safe drinking water. Some newspapers have even acknowledged that in a number of villages in my country innocent children satisfy their hunger by grazing in the fields. Under these circumstances, they devote a massive budget to celebrate their own birthdays, coronation, and the most despicable celebrations of 2500 years of Persian dynasties. ... I shake the hands of all Muslim nations and all the seekers of freedom in the world who fight to cut the roots of colonialism and to liberate themselves from its chains of servitude.⁵²

He ended the letter with his signature and then, as an afterthought, added one more sentence to this piercing indictment. He wrote: "Islam is fundamentally against monarchy. ... [It] has come to raze the palaces of tyrannical dynasties – monarchy is one of the most shameful and filthiest examples of backwardness."⁵³

By renouncing the entire principle of constitutional monarchy on the one hand and recognizing the sovereignty of people on the other, more than ever he needed to revisit the internal contradictions of his doctrine of the *velayat-e faqih*. If the divine offers legitimacy to the jurist's rule, does that make the person of the *faqih* infallible? Is the *faqih*, therefore, only accountable to the Almighty? If so, what will happen to the sovereignty of the people and their right of self-determination? How do people manifest their will? If electoral politics is the foundation of such a manifestation, what then is the relationship between the *faqih* and the people?

Other Ayatollahs had already expressed their discomfort with the inference of Khomeini's doctrine about the infallibility of the *faqih*. In response to this concern, Khomeini returned to his forty-year-old fascination with Ibn Arabi's mystical contemplations and ascetic practices. During those years, Khomeini had argued that through mystical journeys a "mortal – if exceptional – man may reach ever-higher levels of God's divine light."⁵⁴ In late 1972 – two years after his lectures on *velayat-e faqih* – in a series of sermons during the month of Ramadan, Khomeini tried to correct the misconception about the infallibility of the *faqih*. Earlier, he had made it clear that the *faqih* bore no resemblance to the character of the Prophet and his legitimate successors. They are the same only insofar as they share the same responsibility in guiding Muslims toward a just society. In these

lectures, he tried to make a mystical distinction between infallibility of the Prophets and the “perfect man.”⁵⁵

The Prophet was infallible in his essence, in his very being, incapable of wrongdoing. But a *faqih*, who has perfected his faith, comprehends and believes the presence of God in all things, will refrain from sin as long as his faith remains perfect and certain. He highlighted the infallibility of the latter’s acts and the former’s being. Of course, in practice, such a distinction may not be identifiable, but for Khomeini it was a significant theoretical proposition to save himself from accusations of heretical innovations (*bid’at*).

But for his growing revolutionary constituency, disconnected from the seminary traditions, these theological nuances seemed untranslatable. Adopting the Qur’anic concept of *mostaz’afin*, which Shariati popularized as a translation of “wretched of the earth,” Khomeini defined political struggle for justice as the manifestation of pure acts of faith. Rather than insular mystical practices of transcendence, Khomeini viewed the revolutionary acts of *mostaz’afin* and those who represent them as the transformative experience of pure faith. We practice our *’esmat* (infallibility) when we rise up against the tyrants and act the way “Moses did toward the Pharaoh.” He put forward an activist conception of *’esmat*, in which he gives human beings the capacity of transcending themselves and becoming *zell al-Allah* or “the shadow of God.” “Islam recognizes those who abandon personal desires and act in accordance with its teachings as the shadow of God.” But he also asked his audience not to think of these teachings in customary ritualistic ways of piety, but to discover the “logic” and the “spirit” of the Qur’an.⁵⁶

It is evident that the masses that are capable of such transcendence – to become shadows of God – cannot be equated with the minor and insane whose guardianship the *faqih* must acquire. Gradually, not only in practice but also conceptually, Khomeini moved from viewing the revolutionary masses – the *mostaz’afin* – as the subject of the *faqih*’s exercise of authority to regarding them as the source of his legitimacy. He resolves the contradiction between the Divine as the sole source of legitimacy and the sovereignty of the people by stressing the divinity of the peoples’ will as they act on behalf of justice in accordance with Islam. In a meeting in October 1978 with Iranian students and expatriates in Paris, Khomeini argued that once a nation reaches the highest point of transformation in its revolt, the distinction diminishes between the leader and the led:

The Iranian nation is a nation of *mostaz’afin*. A Muslim nation, a nation touched by the grace of God. ... The point here is not commanding or leading the nation. Now all members of our nation, from those youth, even those school children and young people at the universities, students of Islam, the merchants, the farmers, all know that at this point there is no more a need for someone to guide them.⁵⁷

Although Khomeini was reluctant to embrace the republicanism of the Islamic left, he had now laid the foundation for conceptualizing what became one of the hallmarks of his political philosophy: the idea of an Islamic Republic. By attributing a divine character to the masses’ revolutionary struggle for justice, Khomeini resolved the apparent contradiction in his theory of the Islamic state between – on the one hand – the principle of republicanism and people’s right of self-determination and – on the other hand – the Divine will.

In October 1978, after he was forced out of Najaf, Khomeini moved to a suburb of Paris. There he appropriated more freely a political discourse more familiar to his Western audiences. For the first time, Khomeini spoke of his endorsement of an Islamic Republic in an interview with a BBC reporter.

When asked whether he would support a return to the old constitution after the Shah was toppled, Khomeini replied, “No, the book of that constitution is closed. Our entire nation has cried out that they want an Islamic state, but an Islamic state is a republic, based on a referendum and a constitution derived from Islamic laws. ... Naturally, nothing will be done without the consent of the people.”⁵⁸ The significance of the shift in Khomeini’s view, first by setting aside (at least temporarily) his theory of *velayat-e faqih* and then, more importantly, giving the Islamic state a republican character was lost in the heat of the revolutionary upheavals in Iran. It was one month later that a reporter from *Le Monde* returned to the same question and forced Khomeini to reiterate his position without ambiguity:

Le Monde: Your Excellency wishes to establish an Islamic Republic in Iran. For the French people this is ambiguous, because a republic cannot have a religious foundation. Is your republic based on socialism? Constitutionalism? Would you hold elections? Is it democratic?

Ayatollah Khomeini: Our republic has the same meaning as anywhere else. We call it “Islamic Republic” because it has emerged with an Islamic ideology, but the choice belongs to the people. The meaning of the republic is the same as any other republics in the world.⁵⁹

Khomeini and the Making of an Islamic Republic

Not only was the collapse of the old regime with its military might unexpected to its ubiquitously Western supporters, but more importantly, it came like a bolt from the blue for the clerical leadership of the revolution. The clergy was neither ready to assume power nor clear about the actual organizational meaning of an Islamic Republic.

What Khomeini outlined in his lectures on the *velayat-e faqih* in Najaf nearly a decade earlier could hardly resemble the premises and promises of what he now called the Islamic Republic. On a number of occasions, he declared that rather than running the state, the clergy would act only as advisors and counselors to the government. However, these assertions directly contradicted his doctrine of the rule of the *faqih*:

I do not intend to put myself or any other cleric in place of the current regime.⁶⁰

I and other members of the clergy will not have an official position in the next regime. The responsibility of the clergy is to guide the governments.⁶¹

I have never said that the clergy would be responsible for forming a government. They have other occupations. Of course, they will oversee legislation, but not from a partisan view. The clergy relies only on the support of the nation.⁶²

After the revolution, I will not have an executive power except for a guiding and advisory role.⁶³

Khomeini took practical steps beyond his rhetorical endorsement of republicanism by bestowing the responsibility of drafting the new constitution to Hassan Habibi, who later formed a commission comprised of all civil experts in jurisprudence. Not only did Khomeini trust civic jurists to draft the new constitution, but on several occasions he also publicly lent his support to the published preliminary draft in which no mention of *velayat-e faqih* was made. Indeed, until *velayat-e faqih* was passed by the Assembly of Experts on September 12, 1979, Khomeini remained faithful to his 1978 Paris declaration of Islamic republicanism, in which the *ruhaniyat* was to assume an advisory role in guiding the state.⁶⁴

The revolution created a Fanonian “new Man” through a violent process by which people freed

themselves from the yoke of a tyrannical regime. But the victory of the revolution also unequivocally ended the period of symbolic appropriation of Islam by a diverse spectrum of political parties and social groups. Khomeini was well aware that the revolutionary masses, those “touched by the grace of God,” cried out for an Islamic state with reference only to its symbolic and philosophical frame of social justice. As Michael Fischer observed, “Political victory requires a spelling out in political and institutional terms of what previously could be left in vague philosophical and moral language.”⁶⁵ Which group was to become the voice of this symbolic frame was uncertain, even for the undisputed leader of the revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini. The riddle of finding the institutional means of an Islamic social order remains the main paradigm of legitimacy in the Islamic Republic.

Many skeptics doubt whether Khomeini genuinely believed in a republican platform, or argue that he simply appropriated it in order to advance his true intention of the rule of the *faqih*.⁶⁶ But viewing Khomeini’s positions simply as instrumental political maneuvering simplifies reality, as Brumberg aptly observed, in two ways: “First, by confounding the results of a complex historical process with Khomeini’s intentions; second, by assuming that Khomeini was motivated by a coherent set of strategic goals.”⁶⁷ The discussions of the Assembly of Experts for the ratification of the new constitution during the summer of 1979 showed most visibly how the clergy considered itself ill-equipped to assume political power and invent a new Islamic political apparatus. Even the inner circles of power contested the meaning of an Islamic state as an undisputed and self-evident idea of governance.⁶⁸

Khomeini stayed above the sharp debates over the feasibility of *velayat-e faqih*, and did not issue even a single statement supporting any faction until the new constitution was passed in a referendum in December 1979. Undoubtedly, for Khomeini, *velayat-e faqih* was the ideal form of governance. However, he and other advocates of the doctrine did not believe in its feasibility. In 1978, Khomeini became an advocate of Islamic republicanism not as a calculated effort at public deception but rather as an attempt to establish an Islamic regime that could appeal to larger numbers of intellectuals and urban classes. In an interview with *Kayhan* newspaper, Hassan Habibi – whom Khomeini commissioned to draft a new constitution – remarked that Khomeini confided in him that “the realities of our society do not allow a full appreciation of *velayat-e faqih*, our society is not ready to accept this.”⁶⁹ In this moment of intense political uncertainty, Khomeini’s views were guided by his pragmatism and the contingencies of his position during the immediate postrevolutionary power struggle.

The complexities of postrevolutionary quandaries – such as the eight-year war with Iraq, ethnic conflicts in different regions of the country, radical opposition groups and their brutal suppression – made Khomeini increasingly more pragmatic. He began his career by castigating those theologians who justified their political quietism with reference to the principle of *taqiya* (“precautionary dissimulation”) and *maslahat* (“utility,” “expediency,” or “concern for public welfare”). He resented those who had chosen the expediency of silence over the obligation of revolt against tyranny. Now, with the Islamic Republic in place, *maslahat-e nezam* (“the interests of the system”) became the guiding principle of all laws, policies, and social projects.

In contradiction to his earlier stand, in spite of the objections of the majority of Grand Ayatollahs in Qom and Mashhad, not only did Khomeini give his blessing to the formation of a legislative branch, but more importantly, gave it institutional authority to override clerical objections to its legislations. Although the constitution gave the responsibility of legislation to the *majlis*, it also gave the Guardian Council – the members of which were all high-ranking seminary jurists – the power to sanction those laws and exercise authority over the parliament. Khomeini’s new responsibility as the

Supreme Leader compelled him to develop a new jurisprudence whereby he could navigate between the conventions and creeds of the *shariah* and the social and political needs of the postrevolutionary state.

Soon after the revolution, Khomeini realized the limits of jurisprudence in addressing questions of social justice, politics, and the economy. In a letter to Khomeini dated September 27, 1981, Hashemi Rafsanjani, the influential former speaker of the *majlis* and a founding member of the Islamic Republic Party, addressed the new regime's inability to conform concrete issues of social policy to abstract concepts of jurisprudence. The frustrated Rafsanjani wrote to the Supreme Leader that "under these circumstances, based on the teachings of the *shariah*, many policies of the government would be unjustifiable." He closed by posing the question, "Would it be possible to govern this country with the existing interpretations of the *shariah*?"⁷⁰

Khomeini responded that there was no contradiction between discerning the contemporary practical necessities (*zarurat*) and the "primary creeds" of the *shariah*. Indeed, under the Islamic government, the former takes precedence over the latter. Khomeini also laid the foundation for a forthright separation of the traditional Shi'i hierarchy and the elected *majlis* in the determination of these necessities. In a speech addressed to the *majlis*, he delegated the responsibility of the "discernment of *zarurat*" to a two-thirds majority in the *majlis*.⁷¹ Other sources of emulation and Grand Ayatollahs perceived Khomeini's controversial decision with great skepticism, and warned him of the dire consequences of integrating an elected political institution into the process of *ijtihad*.

With his realpolitik, Khomeini went further, even questioning the weight of juridical qualification of the *faqih*. By stressing the centrality of political wisdom in place of religious knowledge, in anticipation of his own demise, Khomeini began to lay the foundation of an Islamic republic in which the preservation and interests of the state would eclipse the ordained obligations and duties prescribed in the *shariah*. Khomeini's new approach took the doctrine of *velayat-e faqih* one step further toward the primacy of the *maslahat* (the political) over the authority of the *fuqaha* (the religious jurists). He marked this doctrine by placing the word *motlaqeh* ("absolute") at the center of his old conception, calling it *velayat-e motlaqeh-ye faqih* (the absolute rule of the *faqih*).

In practice, Khomeini's utilitarianism led to the separation of the *hawza* (the seminary) from the state. By locating the supreme authority to determine state policies in the political sphere, the unintended consequence of the latest transformation in Khomeini's political philosophy was the secularization of *velayat-e faqih*. In effect, Khomeini transformed the idea of the religious state into the invention of a state religion.⁷²

Khomeini's critique of dogmatic *mujtahids* and those who found his *velayat-e motlaqeh* troubling for the independence of the seminaries generated confusion among the leaders of the three branches of the government. In February 1988, in a letter addressed to the Supreme Leader, the heads of the judiciary, legislative, and executive powers asked for guidance on how to approach the problem of *maslahat* institutionally. If precedence alone could not offer solutions to contemporary problems, which institution was responsible for the determination of policies that were both right for the nation and sanctioned by Islam? In a short response, Khomeini called for the formation of the Council for the Discernment of the Expediency of the System to arbitrate between the *majlis* and the Guardian Council. The new council was to facilitate the government's implementation of legislation passed by the *majlis* without the impediments of the Guardian Council's oversight. Khomeini appointed a thirteen-member assembly, headed by the president (Khamenei), and designated a minority position to the Guardian Council.

He issued his most important and often cited *fatwa* on the relation between state and religion when the Guardian Council blocked a new labor law that was ratified in *majlis* in September 1987. Anticipating its rejection, the Minister of Labor posed the question of the legitimacy of the state to intervene in private contracts. In a brief response, the Supreme Leader affirmed that it could.⁷³ When the jurists of the Guardian Council criticized this response, Khomeini pushed further. “The state,” he declared, “may deny its services to any entity that does not comply with its regulations. This applies comprehensively to all matters within state jurisdiction, above and beyond of what the honorable Minister of Labor had previously inquired.”⁷⁴

Then President Khamenei tried to assure the jurists that the Supreme Leader had never intended to privilege a utilitarian view of Islam, or subordinate the universal principles of Islam to the immediate needs of the state. In a Friday prayer sermon, the president preached that Khomeini’s views on the regulatory power of the state did not contradict the jurists of the council’s mandate to uphold the laws and tenets of Islam. He declared that, under the Islamic Republic, the state’s interest ought to be consistent with the Islamically sanctioned laws.⁷⁵ For the Supreme Leader, who for almost a decade avoided direct confrontation with critics in his inner circle, the time for ambiguous declarations had ended. His pending demise would not allow him to continue exploiting the competing interpretations of his rulings. In a letter to the president, he laid out his most far-reaching defense of a utilitarian view of Islam:

I did not intend to engage in a quarrel at this sensitive time. It appears from your sermon during the Friday prayer that ... you attributed to me the idea that the state exercises its authority only within the limits of Divine laws. Your representation completely contradicts my original assertion. ... Governance demarcates a part of the absolute vice-regency of the Prophet of God, and is one of the primary injunctions of Islam and has priority over all other secondary injunctions, even prayer, fasting, and the *hajj*. The ruler may demolish a mosque or a home to build a road and compensate the owner for his house; the ruler may shut the doors of mosques if necessary, and demolish a mosque that is the source of harm; the state may unilaterally annul religiously sanctioned [*shar‘i*] contracts with people, if it discerns that the contract threatens the interests [*maslahat*] of the country and Islam. The state may temporarily suspend any religious matter, of prayer or otherwise, if it deems the practice contrary to the interests of Islam; the state may temporarily prevent *hajj*, which is one of the most important Divine responsibilities, if it is deemed contrary to the interests of the country. What is being said [about the limitations of the state’s authority] is the result of lack of knowledge about the divine absolute *velayat*.⁷⁶

Taken together with his earlier statements on the condition of the *faqih*, Khomeini’s open reprimand of the president and Guardian Council laid out the most radical transformation of the republic from a state conditioned, shaped, and informed by the teachings of Islam to a state that sanctioned, defined, and implemented a contingent Islam. The immediate effect, intentional or otherwise, of turning the theocratic principles of the republic upside down was to transfer institutional authority from the politically independent seminaries to state political institutions. The last step toward the institutionalization of this transformation came with Khomeini’s call for amending the constitution a few months before his death on June 3, 1989.

In a letter to the Council for the Reappraisal of the Constitution in April 1988, Khomeini admitted that he had committed an error in requiring the Supreme Leader to be a source of emulation.⁷⁷ The responsibilities of the Leader, he insisted, are wider and more complex than matters of jurisprudence.

In another letter, he made it clear that he wished to distinguish political leadership of the nation from the highest religious authorities of the seminaries. His letter was read in the Council's meeting: "The commonly practiced *ijtihad* in the seminaries does not qualify anyone to discern the expediencies of our society. Those who do not have the depth of knowledge required for managing the world of politics and leading the society in this complicated world must not take over the responsibility of running the country."⁷⁸ With the elimination of *marja'yyat* (being a source of emulation) as a requirement to hold the office of *velayat-e faqih*, Khomeini's philosophy of the primacy of the political over the religious was finally institutionalized.

Conclusion

What marked Khomeini's political philosophy was a form of utilitarian pragmatism that was often cloaked in universal claims of divine justice. In this chapter, I demonstrated how radical transformations of his ideas reflected the changing social and political circumstances of his time. His political life, from conventional quietism to a functional expediency-driven theology, can be described as an incessant mission to reinvent himself. He left behind a body of work imbued with contradictions and ambiguities, enough for his successors to reinvent him perpetually in order to justify their competing claims over his legacy.

Khomeini's political philosophy is often understood as an "attempt to create a Shi'a theocracy in which the state is totally subordinated to the clergy and its powers are drastically circumscribed."⁷⁹ In practice, however, the Islamic Republic has expanded the authority of the state to the remotest quarters of the seminaries. The institution of the clergy has lost its independence and become subservient to the demands of the Republic. Khomeini located Islam in the public sphere by politicizing religion and advancing a religious politics. The most important legacy of his political theology rests in the unintended consequences of his political theology. The creation of the Islamic Republic transformed Islam from an a priori source of legitimacy into a contested body of discourses with competing proponents. It shifted the authority of interpretation of the sacred text from the offices of high-ranking clerics to the boardrooms of state officials and lay intellectuals. Khomeini intended to sacralize politics, but he succeeded in secularizing Islam.

¹ Michael Fischer, "Imam Khomeini: Four Levels of Understanding" in John Esposito (ed.), *Voices of Resurgent Islam* (Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 152.

² There are numerous hagiographical accounts that embellish Khomeini's political involvement in his early life. For example, see Seyyed Ali Qaderi, *Khomeini Ruhollah: Zendeginameh Imam Khomeini* (Tehran: Institute for the Arrangement and Publication of Imam Khomeini's Works, 2001), vol. i, pp. 232–250. Some even suggest that Khomeini was also involved in Mirza Kuchak Khan's Jangal rebellion against Reza Shah, and had visited the Jangalis in the Caspian Sea mountains (Amir Reza Sotudeh, *Pa beh pa-ye aftar: The Spoken and Unspoken of Imam's Life*) (Tehran: Panjareh Publishers, 1995), vol. i, p. 30.

[3](#) Baqer Moin, *Khomeini: Life of the Ayatollah* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1999), p. 28.

[4](#) Hakamizadeh is cited in Farhang Rajaee, *Islamism and Modernism: The Changing Discourse in Iran* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007), p. 66.

[5](#) Ruhollah Khomeini, *Kashf-e Asrar* (n.d., n.p.), p. 230.

[6](#) *Ibid.*, pp. 203–205.

[7](#) Vali Nasr, *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts within Islam Will Shape the Future* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006), p. 122.

[8](#) Khomeini, *Kashf-e Asrar*, pp. 226–228.

[9](#) For a short introduction to his ideas, see Yann Richard, “Shari‘at Sangalaji: A Reformist Theologian of the Reza Shah Period,” in Said Amir Arjomand (ed.), *Authority and Political Culture in Shi‘ism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), pp. 159–177.

[10](#) Shari‘at Sangalaji, *Kelid-e fahm-e Qur‘an* (Tehran: Danesh Publishers, n.d.), pp. 21–33.

[11](#) Khomeini, *Kashf al-Asrar*, p. 236.

[12](#) Said Amir Arjomand, “The State and Khomeini’s Islamic Order,” *Iranian Studies*, vol. 13, no. 1–4 (1980), p. 152.

- [13](#) *Bahsi darbarez-ye marja'iyat va ruhaniyat* (Tehran: Enteshar Inc., 1962).
- [14](#) Mahmoud Taleqani, “*Tamarkoz va adam-e tamarkoz marja'ei va fatwa*” in *Bahsi darbarez-ye marja'iyat va ruhaniyat*, pp. 201–211.
- [15](#) Mehdi Bazargan, “*Entezarat mardom az maraje*” in *Bahsi darbarez-ye marja'iyat va ruhaniyat*, pp. 103–127.
- [16](#) Morteza Mutahhari, “*Ijtihad dar Islam*,” p. 52.
- [17](#) Ruhollah Khomeini, *Sahifeh-ye Nur*, vol. i, (Tehran: The Institute for the Publication of Imam's Works, 1983–1994), p. 78.
- [18](#) *Ibid.*, pp. 81–112.
- [19](#) *Ibid.*, pp. 88–89, italics added.
- [20](#) *Ibid.*, p. 106.
- [21](#) *Ibid.*, p. 336.
- [22](#) Khomeini's telegram, cited in Ali Davani, *Nehzat-e ruhaniyat-e Iran*, vol. iii, (Tehran: Center for the Documentation of the Islamic Revolution, 1999), pp. 298–299.

[23 Ibid.](#), p. 151.

[24 Ibid.](#), pp. 243–248.

[25](#) For a summary of the events, see Moin, *Khomeini*, pp. 92–128.

[26](#) Ruhollah Khomeini, *Sahifeh-ye Nur*, vol. viii (Tehran: The Institute for the Publication of Imam's Works, 1983–1994), p. 186.

[27](#) Hamid Ruhani, *Barresi-ye tahili az nehzat-e Imam Khomeini* (Tehran: Rah-e Imam Publishers, 1981), pp. 720–726.

[28 Ibid.](#), p. 657.

[29](#) Ruhollah Khomeini, *Velayat-e faqih* (Tehran: Amir Kabir, 1980), pp. 75–76.

[30](#) Ruhollah Khomeini, *Sahifeh-ye Nur*, vol. ix (Tehran: The Institute for the Publication of Imam's Works, 1983–1994), p. 136.

[31](#) Khomeini, *Sahifeh*, vol. viii, p. 275.

[32](#) Khomeini, *Velayat*, p. 9.

[33](#) The main conflict between Usuli (literary meaning “based on principles”) and Akhbari (literary meaning “based on narrative reports”) schools of jurisprudence is over the role of the clergy in using interpretive reasoning (*ijtihad*) in religious matters. Whereas Akhbaris believe that the only source of issuing a verdict is by reference to the Qur’an and the *hadith* (the life examples of the Prophet), Usulis rely on the interpretive judgment of high-ranking *ulama* in order to form an opinion about emergent issues. Usulis have dominated Shi’a jurisprudence since the early eighteenth century and have given rise to the contemporary hierocracy and the office of the source of emulation (*marja-e taqlid*).

[34](#) Cited in Seyyed Hussein Yusefi Fakhr, “*Nesbat-e fiqh va siyasat az manzar-e Imam Khomeini va Ghazali*,” *Tolu’*, vol. 3, no. 10–11 (2004), p. 192.

[35](#) Ruhollah Khomeini, *Sahifeh-ye Nur*, vol. xxi (Tehran: The Institute for the Publication of Imam’s Works, 1983–1994), p. 98. I have translated the concept of “*ijtihad-e jowhari*” to hermeneutics, although Khomeini never uses the latter term. *Jowhar* literally means “essence,” and here it stands against “literal” understanding of the text.

[36](#) Ruhollah Khomeini, *Sho’oun va ekhtiyarat-e vali-ye faqih*, translated from Arabic by M. Haj Ali Fard (Tehran: The Ministry of Culture Press, 1986), pp. 30–36.

[37](#) Khomeini, *Velayat*, p. 43.

[38](#) Khomeini, *Velayat*, pp. 43–45.

[39](#) Khomeini, *Velayat*, p. 42.

[40](#) Khomeini, *Velayat*, p. 51.

[41](#) Khomeini, *Velayat*, p. 51.

[42](#) Khomeini, *Velayat*, p. 172.

[43](#) This is the idea I discussed earlier on how for centuries influential Shi‘i jurists justified living under tyrannical regimes. They believed that during the time of occultation, all political systems were unjust. They nevertheless accepted the need to submit to their rule for the greater good of security and safety. This practice was called *taqiya*.

[44](#) For a good review, see Jamileh Kadivar, *Tahavvol-e gofteman-e Shi‘eh dar Iran* (Therna: Tarh-e No, 2000), pp. 199–218.

[45](#) Rasul Ja‘fariyan, *Tashayo‘ dar Araq, marja‘iyat dar Iran* (Tehran: Institute for the Study of Contemporary History of Iran, 2007), p. 95.

[46](#) For an excellent review of his life and ideas, see Ali Rahnema, *An Islamic Utopian: A Political Biography of Ali Shariati* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1998).

[47](#) For a critical analysis, see Behrooz Ghamari-Tabrizi, *Islam and Dissent in Postrevolutionary Iran* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2008), pp. 164–187.

[48](#) See Rahnema, *Islamic Utopian*, pp. 272–275.

[49](#) Moin, *Khomeini*, p. 177.

[50](#) Daniel Brumberg, *Reinventing Khomeini: The Struggle for Reform in Iran* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), p. 71.

[51](#) Ruhollah Khomeini, *Sahifeh-ye Nur*, vol. ii (Tehran: The Institute for the Publication of Imam's Works, 1983–1994), p. 322.

[52](#) *Ibid.*, p. 325.

[53](#) *Ibid.*, p. 326.

[54](#) Brumberg, *Reinventing Khomeini*, p. 87.

[55](#) Ruhollah Khomeini, *Jahad-e akbar* (Tehran: Institute for the Publication of Imam Khomeini's Works), 1993, p. 49.

[56](#) Ruhollah Khomeini, *Sahifeh-ye Nur*, vol. iii (Tehran: The Institute for the Publication of Imam's Works, 1983–1994), pp. 348–349.

[57](#) Ruhollah Khomeini, *Sahifeh-ye Nur*, vol. iv (Tehran: The Institute for the Publication of Imam's Works, 1983–1994), p. 96.

[58](#) Khomeini, *Sahifeh*, vol. iii, p. 514.

[59](#) Khomeini, *Sahifeh*, vol. iv, p. 479.

[60](#) Ruhollah Khomeini, *Sahifeh-ye Nur*, vol. v, (Tehran: The Institute for the Publication of Imam's Works, 1983–1994), p. 308.

[61](#) *Ibid.*, p. 472.

[62](#) *Ibid.*, p. 482.

[63](#) Khomeini, *Sahifeh*, vol. iv, p. 437.

[64](#) For a detailed discussion, see Ghamari-Tabrizi, *Islam and Dissent*, pp. 36–85.

[65](#) Michael Fischer, *Iran from Religious Dispute to Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), p. 184.

[66](#) For example, see Said Amir Arjomand, *The Turban for the Crown: The Islamic Revolution in Iran* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988); Asghar Schirazi, *The Constitution of Iran: Politics and the State in the Islamic Republic*, (trans.) John O'Kane (London: I.B. Tauris, 1997); and Robin Wright, *In the Name of God: The Khomeini Decade* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989).

[67](#) Brumberg, *Reinventing Khomeini*, p. 101.

[68](#) Ghamari-Tabrizi, *Islam and Dissent*, pp. 36–85.

[69](#) Cited in Mohsen Kadivar, *Hokumat-e vela'i* (Tehran: Nay, 1999), p. 183.

[70](#) Hossein Mehrpour (ed.), *Majmu'eh-ye nazariyat-e shura-ye negahban*, vol. i (Tehran: Center for the Islamic Revolution Documents, 1993), p. 73.

[71](#) *Ibid.*, pp. 68–80.

[72](#) See Said Hajjarian, *Az shahed-e qodsi ta shahed-e bazari: 'Urfi-shodan-e din dar sepehr-e siyosat* (Tehran: Tarh-e No, 2001); and Akbar Ganji, *Tallaqi-ye fashisti az din va hokumat* (Tehran: Tarh-e No, 2000), pp. 32–56, 76–106.

[73](#) Mehrparvar (ed.), *Ibid.*, p. 55.

[74](#) Ruhollah Khomeini, *Sahifeh-ye Nur*, vol. xx (Tehran: The Institute for the Publication of Imam's Works, 1983–1994), p. 165.

[75](#) Hajjarian, *Shahed*, p. 116.

[76](#) Khomeini, *Sahifeh*, vol. xx, p. 170.

[77](#) *Surat-e mashruh-e mozakerat-e baznegari-ye qanun-e asasi-ye jomhuri-ye eslami-ye Iran*, vol. i, p. 58.

[78](#) *Ibid.*, pp. 197–198.

[79](#) Arjomand, *Khomeini's Order*, p. 147.

10 Khomeini's Legacy on Women's Rights and Roles in the Islamic Republic of Iran

Arzoo Osanloo

In the summer of 2012, the Islamic Republic convened the first international conference on Women and the Islamic Awakening. Held in Tehran in early July, the two-day conference hosted female intellectuals and scholars from around the world. The Iranian press boasted the participation of more than 1,500 female researchers, scholars, and social activists from around 80 countries that participated in the conference and presented more than 450 papers.¹

Iran's president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, delivered the inaugural speech at the opening ceremony of the two-day conference that included senior Iranian and foreign officials.² In a live national television production on July 10, 2012, President Ahmadinejad addressed the convention hall; mostly assembled with women from the invited countries and senior Iranian officials. He began by asking why the role of women is so important in Islam, and what was meant by the term "awakening" in this context. He spoke of women's unique capacities for loving kindness (*mohebat*), compassion (*mehraboony*), nurturing (*tarbiat*), providing help (*komak*), and respect (*ehteram*). He went on to say that women stood shoulder to shoulder with men, providing the seat of love and kindness (*kanoon-e eshq o mohebat-e ensan*). Commenting on the social and familial roles of women in this address, Ahmadinejad added: "Your assignment is a very heavy one" (*Mamooreat-e shoma besseeyar sangeen ast*). Indeed, he spoke about the broader goals of "reforming the world" (*eslahe jahan shoddast*), and continued to say that "just because it is a big job, do not think that you cannot achieve it."

Both the president, and earlier Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, couched their remarks in the broader challenges that Islam faces in the world at present: "The West has tried to deprive Muslim women of their identity through an all-out effort ... considers women to be a 'commodity' and an object for the pleasure of men." On the other hand, "Islam believes that a woman is honorable, dignified and progressive, and believes that a woman has an independent character and identity."³ Regarding women and the Islamic Awakening, Khamenei remarked that wherever women consciously participate in a social movement, "the progress of that movement is guaranteed. ... The Islamic Awakening is a unique movement and one that can change the current path of history."⁴

Ayatollah Khamenei took the opportunity to situate the Islamic Awakening in a broader political context of the "arrogant powers" (the United States and Israel), sanctions against Iran, and the Palestinian issue. During that same summer, Iran's state-run television station ran and reran a program on motherhood, women's employment, and childcare concerns of working mothers. Aired on Channel Two, the station dedicated its programming to women and families. A round-table discussion ensued, with more than a dozen women seated together discussing the difficult realities of women and working outside the home. The discussion primarily consisted of concerns for the economic situation that increasingly requires dual-earner families. Several women raised concerns for proper attention to their roles as mothers and raising children while attending to their duties at work. In a rare twist that unsettled the monolithic and fixed identity of women as mothers and wives first, one young woman raised the issue of having children. She said that she was not sure she even

wanted children, and queried whether it was acceptable in Iran for a woman to forgo the gifts of motherhood and pursue her career instead.⁵

Although interesting, these comments were generally overlooked, as the vast majority of the discussants were, in actuality, mothers and concerned predominantly with how to balance work life with their duties associated with being a mother and wife. Even in Iran's apparent shift towards conservatism following the 2005 elections, debates about the role and rights of women and their importance to the social and political well-being of the nation took place in the public sphere, and even within contexts tightly controlled by the "principalists," the more conservative offices of the state that control national television and radio.

The public airing of this discussion and the presentation of the myriad issues facing women both contradict and confirm the varying interpretations of women's rights and roles in the Islamic Republic since the Revolution. Today, the possibilities and opportunities presented to women in Iran are more complex than were first anticipated in the immediate aftermath of the Revolution. This continued complexity and seeming contradiction, I argue, stems from Khomeini's designation of women's status as central to the much broader aim of creating an Islamic government, *Hookoomat-e Islami*, in post-revolutionary Iran – both politically/discursively and legally/materially. As such, this legacy has given women's issues a permanent foothold in state politics, as their concerns are couched in the broader issues of social justice affecting the entire nation.

To consider Khomeini's legacy on women's status and rights in contemporary Iran, one might be well-served to revisit Khomeini's writings and speeches on women prior to his consecration as the first *Vali-e Faqih* of the newly formed Islamic Republic of Iran back in 1979. Going back to his 1967 response to the newly enacted law that gave women some rights in marriage dissolution, however, sets the stage for the changes that were to come a decade and a half later. In that well-documented response, issued as a *fatwa* (religious edict), Khomeini vehemently criticized the Family Protection Law (FPL) as contrary to Islamic principles. He branded women who divorced under the law and then remarried as bigamists and adulterers:

[T]he law that recently passed the two houses of the Majlis (which [in their present composition] are illegal and contrary to the *shari'a*) on the orders of the agents of the foreigners, the law designated the "Family Law," which has as its purpose the destruction of the Muslim family unit, is contrary to the ordinances of Islam. Those who have imposed [this law] and those who have voted [for it] are criminals from the standpoint of both the *shari'a* and the law. The divorce of women divorced by court order is invalid; they are still married women, and if they marry again, they become adulteresses. Likewise, anyone who knowingly marries a woman so divorced becomes an adulterer, deserving the penalty laid down by the *shari'a*. The issue of such union will be illegitimate, unable to inherit, and subject to all other regulations concerning illegitimate offspring. All of the foregoing applies equally whether the court itself awards the divorce directly, orders the divorce to take place, or compels the husband to divorce his wife.^{6,7}

Far from being understood as a signal of things to come, women from numerous backgrounds protested in the months leading up to the Shah's January 16, 1979 departure from Iran. Of course, the desire to end monarchy prompted such protests on the part of leftist as well as religious groups, which seemed to have brought two distinct movements to merge over their deeply divergent views on governance.⁸ Interviews I conducted similarly indicate that despite these differences of opinion, secular leftists and pious women also poured into the streets to greet Khomeini upon his return to the

country.

The interviews that I conducted about women's rights reflect similar attitudes about social mobilization at the time.⁹ Women I spoke with explained their involvement in the broad movement to end the monarchy.¹⁰ For instance, Layla,¹¹ a mother of two, who was in her teens during the revolution, told me that she participated in the street protests for the Shah's ouster. She said that she remembered being at home in the evenings and listening to her family members, especially her older brothers, speaking of the end of monarchy. Layla, who was divorced and employed in a gym when I met her, added that for her family, who were not wealthy and did not own property, the tirades against the Shah's waste and submission to the West, especially the United States, were influential. She also remembered celebrating Khomeini's return: "He promised us free electricity and fuel!"

The claims of waste and the need for resource redistribution through, for instance, the receipt of dividends on the sale of oil were often cited among my interlocutors as their reasons for participating in street protests. As were the claims that they did not expect the system of governance to come into place that did. In another interview, Sussan, a doctor, clarified that she was not political, but joined the protests because the end of the monarchy meant the beginning of a constitutional democracy in Iran: "That's what we were struggling for." On the other hand, Shora, a leftist, was clearly pained when the revolution she supported was taken over by the *ulema*: "We never expected Islam to be completely absent. This is a religious country. Of course, we knew that, but [Khomeini's] speeches from outside the country were very supportive of women's rights. He supported women's strong participation in the revolution to oust the Shah and we assumed that attitude would continue with the new government." Indeed, in one of the speeches he circulated, Khomeini spoke to women's political participation and even suggested a woman could be head of state.¹²

Women I interviewed from more religious or traditional families related greater social freedoms after the revolution. They noted that they had grown up in families that kept their daughters, wives, and mothers out of the civil life of pre-revolutionary Iran, citing inappropriate social mores that would harm their and their families' dignity and reputation. A woman who worked at the Ministry of Housing, Shadi, related to me that after Khomeini's return and the formation of the new state, her family, including her new husband, supported her continuing on in her studies and her later employment in government. Shadi said that the post-revolutionary government created an environment where it was possible for women from such families to work outside of the home: "My family and husband knew while at work, I was being respected by my co-workers and in an office that was dignified." She conveyed that while at work, she was also able to be attentive to her obligations as a wife and mother: "We have day-care right here. My daughter takes a bus from school and comes here."

As the respondents I have quoted point out, there was a great deal of collective participation in the ouster of the Shah and almost as much in welcoming Khomeini back. Although many women noted that they did not expect the state of affairs to change as much as they did, especially in regards to women's lives, status, and the discourse around them, in my interviews many highlighted stark contradictions, the root of which were the competing visions of women's roles in the new Islamic republic. Whereas all my respondents noted the vast changes in their lives, some noted with disappointment the losses of freedom, mobility, and legal standing; others mentioned the opportunities for more rural, traditional, and/or religious women.

Today, another splinter has emerged within this latter group of Khomeini supporters. Those who, as religious reformists, argue that Khomeini's vision for women was one of greater power, participation, and legal standing, with an approach to Islam that is more dynamic and in tune with

exigencies of contemporary life, and cite Mohammad Khatami, president from 1997 to 2005, as espousing Khomeini's legacy. Others, as principalists, argue that Khomeini's legacy is best understood in the post-Khatami period, with a return to attention to women's roles as mothers and wives and a focus on the family as providing the solid foundation to a healthy society.¹³

Khomeini after the Revolution: State Formation and Women

Despite the jubilation on the part of many groups upon seeing the end of monarchy in Iran, and even Khomeini's return to Iran on February 1, 1979 after fifteen years in exile, the joyful and optimistic mood of the country was quickly halted for many just three weeks later. On February 26, 1979, Khomeini announced that he was suspending the FPL, which had given women some legal relief in marriage disputes by enumerating a number of remedies available to them, including dissolution.

The suspension of the FPL took some activists by surprise. Although many had marched to help overthrow the monarchy, the apparently rapid turn of events highlighted the symbolic role women would come to play in the discursive politics of the new government. The revolutionary discourse was largely aimed against the excesses of Western societies that the Shah's government was trying to emulate. Vocal *ulema*, as revolutionary leaders, sought to return the country to what they proclaimed were its indigenous values.¹⁴ This struck a chord with a broad segment of the population, and was not isolated purely among religious groups. Depictions of immodest women prior to the revolution had become tropes to illustrate the excesses wrought by the Shah's Westernization programs.¹⁵

In 1979, revolutionary discourse mobilized the image of the *chador*-clad Iranian woman as a foil to the Western woman. In contrast to the pious Iranian woman, the Western woman was objectified, commoditized, and hyper-sexualized, and thus un-emancipated and oppressed. The 1983 Veiling Act legislated in tandem with a discourse of rehabilitating the Iranian woman and restoring her to a place of respect; the chador was symbolic not just of the renewed piety of the Iranian woman, but also of a collective shift in Iran as depicted by women, in the name of the whole country – a political shift toward a religio-national idea of Iran that represented the triumph of the Revolution over the Western values that epitomized the Pahlavi monarchy.

The efforts on behalf of secular and pious women to overthrow the monarchy brought about both a collective language and diverse social body to work together on women's issues. Certainly there were disagreements about precisely how to raise women's status in Iran, but there was collective agreement that women's issues were important concerns for the nation to be addressed by the new government. By placing women's issues and the improvements of their status as a primary revolutionary aim, the new leaders were also committing the post-revolutionary state to address women's concerns. In doing so, the new government could now be held accountable for promises to improve women's status throughout the country. Of course, there was broad agreement on the need to improve women's status, but just what constituted improvements and how improvements would be implemented would be and continues to be topics for debate.

The emphasis on women's participation alongside the focus on women's roles as mothers and wives has brought about the seeming contradictions in both state discourse and civil advocacy on women's issues. Khomeini's attempt to forge an Islamic government with the aim of improving women's status, nonetheless, contributed to the post-revolutionary women's movement in some unexpected ways. One of the lasting legacies of Khomeini's attention to women, however, is that it has provided some room for maneuver. These spaces for maneuver were created by the protracted attention to women's issues during the revolutionary period, the absence of institutions to address

women's concerns immediately after the founding of the new state, and the exigencies of the war with Iraq just as the post-revolutionary state was taking shape.

Discourse of rehabilitation of women

One of the period's most influential religious scholars, a close advisor to Khomeini and chairman of the Revolutionary Council, was Ayatollah Morteza Mutahhari. Mutahhari authored a number of influential books and articles on many facets of Islam, but was especially well-known for his writings on women. His work on women's roles in Islamic society was published in serial format in a nationally syndicated women's magazine, *Zan-e ruz (Today's Woman)* in the years preceding the revolution, and raised many issues for public discussion and debate. In his work on women's status in Islamic society, Mutahhari argued against the idea of individual rights, especially from the gender-neutral perspective found in Western-based documents such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.¹⁶ For Mutahhari, rights could not be separated from the religious obligations laid down in the sacred texts for the good of society as a whole – as interpreted by the *ulema*. Women and men had distinct rights and obligations as a function of their relative biological dispositions, Mutahhari argued.

Mutahhari considered society's recognition of biological differences as fundamental to the proper functioning of society. He disdained a notion of gender equality that did not take what he considered the natural biological dispositions of men and women into account. Although he found that Islam approved of gender equality, it did not “agree with identicalness, uniformity and exact similarity.”¹⁷ He moreover believed that Islam gave priority to rights of societies, communities, and families over those of individuals. For a society to be healthy, Mutahhari argued, individuals must subordinate the will of the individual for the greater good, and their roles, best exemplified through the texts of Islam, should be in harmony with their biological and psychological characters.¹⁸ Mutahhari viewed the most important duty of women as being that of motherhood, and thus her natural endeavors should be with her family.

Despite the many disagreements with Mutahhari's thinking on gender equality, both at the time and in the years since these writings first appeared they have inspired conservative state officials' arguments for gender-based social divisions both then and now. Khomeini also spoke publicly against the discourse of gender equality. His concerns were similarly related to social morality, but he also pointedly criticized the use of gender equality as a means of undermining Islam as the primary source of law in the country. In 1962, Khomeini made numerous speeches to this effect as the Shah announced plans to enfranchise women the following year:

The ruling regime (of the Shah) in Iran infringed upon the holy Islamic laws and is now set to violate the unequivocal and mandatory laws of the Qur'an. The honour and dignity of the Muslims are about to be violated and through legislation, which contravenes shari'a, law and the Constitution, the tyrannical regime means to put chaste women to shame and humiliate the Iranian nation. The tyrannical regime intends to introduce legislation and implement equal rights for men and women, in other words, it means to trample underfoot the incontrovertible and mandatory laws of Islam and the Most Noble Qur'an.¹⁹

Public statements, prayers, and speeches were replete with discussions about the morality of women and the importance of women's modesty in raising honorable sons and daughters in guiding the

family, and ultimately the nation. Because the family is said to be “the fundamental unit of society,”²⁰ the ultimate success of the family and nation depends on the moral virtue of women. For this reason, women’s honor was a matter of public concern and in need of surveillance and intervention. By recognizing women’s roles in nurturing the nation and its citizens, however, the state also acknowledged women’s political roles within the nation.

Khomeini repeatedly acknowledged women’s participatory roles in society. In the following excerpt from a speech to a group of women on Women’s Day, he builds on the exemplar of Fatima – the daughter of the Prophet and wife of Imam Ali – in exhorting women to struggle against injustice:

Iranian women were actively involved in all affairs, from the cultural to the economic, and today a large number of them are involved in agriculture, a large number in industry and still others in the educational arena in the areas of literature, science and the arts. All of these efforts are commendable in the eyes of God the Blessed and the Exalted, and you are all in God’s care. As long as you remain committed, God the Blessed and the Exalted will assist you. Strive to purify your character and to make your friends do likewise. Strive so that you react to the outrages committed against you. In your attempts to uphold all the qualities that make up the great character of woman, be as that unique woman, Hazrat Fatima Zahra, upon whom peace was.²¹

Revolutionary state and non-state actors turned to the language of rights as they mobilized a new image of the Iranian woman; one that was the opposite of a typified and objectified Western woman. This drew from the work of Mutahhari, Khomeini, and other revolutionary leaders that associated the language of rights with the idea of naked individualism prioritized by Western societies, which was inattentive to social or familial responsibility, and thus led to the collapse of a healthy society. Family, in this moral order, was the foundation, and women were at its center. Revolutionary leaders argued that the specific needs of individuals, especially women, were to cede to the more significant needs of families and society. Rights in this context became a signifier of a sense of entitlement without accountability, thought to be the source of much of the ills found in Western societies, characterized by excess and anomie. Women in particular were singled out for being persuaded to cultivate individualism and abandon their natural roles as nurturers in family and society.

This discourse was most vividly portrayed in the protests against the abrogation of the FPL that took place for several days, starting on March 8, 1979 – International Women’s Day. On that day, thousands of women throughout Iran marched to protest the state’s intrusions in their civil and personal liberties. For several days, women protested in street rallies against the newly imposed restrictions. They held up banners that demanded “freedom,” “equal rights,” and the abolition of new laws discriminating against women.²² In response to their demands, counter protestors physically and verbally attacked the protestors, shouting that they were “Westernstruck” (*Gharbazdeh*), a term denoting that they were diseased by the West, “Barbie dolls,” and “Western puppets.” At this time, revolutionary forces denied these women the legitimacy of a language of rights, calling them the tools of Western imperialist forces seeking to undermine Iran’s commitment to Islam. By insulting women who couched their grievances in a discourse of rights and referring to them as intoxicated by the West, the supporters of the new state were reacting to what they perceived to be outside influences that advocated individualism. Women’s focus, they felt, should be their families and the collective aims of their nation.

The war with Iraq required a national effort and led to some pragmatic rethinking of women’s roles in betterment of society as a whole, which included women sending their sons to war and

leaving the home to seek employment while their husbands were away. And even after the war, women that were encouraged to work outside the home were now less inclined, and practically speaking, unable, to forego the income their work outside the home provided. One of the key images leaders deployed during this period was that of Fatima. Fatima is and was the ideal woman for the revolutionary state. Fatima's qualities were earlier recorded in a key essay by Ali Shariati, an inspiration of revolutionaries both religious and secular. Shariati, a sociologist educated in the West, wrote inspiringly of Western imperialism and corrupting values, which were very influential in Iran throughout the last century. Shariati's writings, in fact, may have been one of the key ingredients that brought leftist and religious groups together by making use of common discourses of oppression. One of the key sites upon which Shariati made use of this common discourse was by analyzing women. In his important essay, *Fatimah Fatimah-ast (Fatima Is Fatima)*, Shariati highlighted the sublime qualities of Muslim women and elevated their status from the commoditized, consumerist image of the Western woman. For Shariati, who was worried about Western cultural imperialism threatening Iran, the image of Fatima replaced the Western women as the ideal modern woman for Iranians, and served as an indigenous model of femininity.²³

Khomeini similarly made use of Fatima as the ideal model of femininity. Her birthday, March 8, replaced International Women's Day as Iran's official Women's Day. In numerous addresses, Khomeini sanctified Fatima as the perfect Islamic woman, whose qualities as a justice-seeker, educator of children, and pious Muslim others should strive to emulate:

Likewise, if you women here, indeed all our women all over the country, have accepted today as Women's Day, that is, have accepted the day which marks the birthday of Hazrat Fatima Zahra, with all the perfection it represents and the position it enjoys, as Women's Day, then you have a great task to perform, one which includes struggle, just as she struggled, to the best of her ability, during the short span of her life, addressing the government of the time and passing judgment on them. To truly accept her birthday as Women's Day, you must imitate her. To truly accept it you must follow her example in her renunciation of the things of this world, in her devotion and piety and in all the virtues she possessed.²⁴

As a historical figure, Fatima serves to displace, supersede, and even render impertinent Western anxieties about gender equality. The issue Fatima's image communicates is not whether women are inferior to men, but rather moves beyond that question to convey the exemplary figure of Shi'i female devotion – to family, nation, and ultimately, to God. Khomeini's annual speeches on Iranian Woman's Day aimed to demonstrate how Fatima speaks to the concerns of the Iranian state as she is deployed as a bridge between modernity and tradition; especially during the war when women sent their sons to the front and continued the necessary household duties, also entering the workforce to sustain the economy while men were involved in the war effort. Thus, the tremendous importance the new Khomeini government and state officials lent to women's issues – as the basis of a healthy society – served activists to keep a steady focus on the conditions of women's lives, and the need to improve society through improving the lot of women.

The revolutionary aim of improving society through the rehabilitation of women gave women unexpected social and political power, as improvements in the condition of women's lives were indicative of the success and legitimacy of the new state. After the Revolution, increased attention to women's status led to large increases in rates of female participation in health care, literacy, education, and the labor force – better than before the Revolution. Some two-thirds of university

students in Iran are women. In addition, women's groups have used the focus on their actions, roles, and comportment to make specific demands for legal redress, especially in the context of family laws and calls for an end to gender discrimination.

The Revolutionary leaders' use of women's status as a primary locus of the Revolution and the site of the nation's rehabilitation also caused women's issues to be indicators of the state's very legitimacy. Discourses about the objectification of women stressed the need to focus on their intellectual development. This, in turn, intensified the focus on women's education and productive social and political participation. Despite the criticism by the *ulema* of couching reforms in terms of "rights," the civil-legal apparatus that eventually took shape in the years following the Revolution engendered a new discourse on women's rights, one that was now legitimized by the Islamic republican formalism of the state.

From Lack of Formalism to Islamic-Republican Bureaucracy

Despite much conjecture about the aims of Islamic government, there was no bureaucratic program for the daily operations of the state. This lack of formalism initially created confusion, but also gave reformists some tangible avenues through which to organize and effect change. Just after the Revolution, the Islamic Republic came into formation, but it remained a novel enterprise whose operations, born of compromise, were still unclear. In the mid-'80s, scholar Richard Cottam noted that "after several years of revolution, there is still no accepted developmental strategy for achieving this esoteric end."²⁵ There was no certainty about the final product of state formation, and this remains the case today. What was clear was that the Iranian Revolution transformed the monarchy into the Islamic Republic, founded on principles of republicanism and Shi'i Islam. This was a compromise that emerged through a series of struggles that persist to this day. The result was a hybrid state formation that emphasized two main factors leading to the revolution: Islam and popular consensus. For many of Khomeini's followers, however, this compromise represented a middle ground towards the greater goal of an Islamic government. It was in this space of compromise, however, in which women's advocates found spaces to maneuver and act collectively. And because they grew from within the Islamic Republic, state actors gave in begrudgingly, beaten by their own logic.

As Cottam noted, although Khomeini attempted to move toward the ultimate aim of Islamic government, he lacked any programmatic strategy to implement such a theory. Thus, the legal institutions and processes that came into formation to implement Khomeini's theory of governance, and also shaped the spaces for advocacy, were institutions of republican governance. These were institutions that were equally legitimized by a republican state framework as well as Islamic principles. As I have argued elsewhere, some of the changes in women's status, roles, and rights emerged, perhaps unwittingly, from the possibilities and opportunities created by these hybrid state institutions.²⁶

In the creation of the new Islamic Republic, Khomeini disbanded formal laws and law-making institutions, such as family protection law, civil courts, and even civil legislature, opting instead for the Majlis-e Shora-ye Islami (Islamic Parliamentary Council) as "a simple planning body."²⁷ In the period that followed, the confusion of judges over the appropriate laws to use and how courts were to administer them led activists, members of parliament, and the judiciary to complain loudly of a lack of recourse, and to demand the standardization of the judicial process for family law disputes.

The array of complaints and complainants is significant, as they highlight the failure of Khomeini's theory of Islamic government to provide any framework for state administration. The

calls for formalism forced the reinstatement of civil courts. As Iran's new leaders brought the republican state together with the ideological underpinnings of the *shariah*, a unique situation arose in the administration of justice through law. These pragmatic reforms signaled that a crucial shift was taking place in what was now developing as a hybrid legal system. Despite Khomeini's declared aim to turn the monarchical state into an Islamic government by Islamicizing its judiciary, the need for a uniform system of administration – legal process – took precedence over the moral idealism of the *shariah*.

The calls for uniformity of the family laws and action by *ulema* to recodify them signaled not only an historical, but also an ideological shift in the administration of the *shariah*. The victorious *ulema* had “inherited the political and hierarchical judiciary organization of the Iranian nation-state, as formally rationalized by seven decades of Western-inspired modernization,” and this was the system they used to regularize the Islamic principles.²⁸

State officials responded to the pleas for legal normalization by taking the surprising decision to administer the *shariah* through civil codes, transforming Islamic principles into codified law, and making the *shariah* increasingly transparent and predictable. The decision of the Iranian *ulema* to administer the *shariah* through the European civil law system, the model of judicial organization it had inherited from the previous regime, was ironic as well as historic. In creating an Islamic state that aimed to return Islam to the people, the merger of the *shariah* with a civil legal process ultimately brought about the end of the traditional system of Islamic justice.

That the area of family law played a large part in the systematization and rationalization of the legal order is significant, due to the critical role that laws of the family have played in the Islamic historical context. In the past, public and criminal laws were deemed to be within the purview of the state or the ruling shah, but family laws were deemed the sole responsibility of scholars of Islamic jurisprudence.²⁹ The codification and legislative administration of family laws brought the issues of family out from being the sole province of the clerics and into the emerging space of the public sphere. As attempts to integrate *shariah* into a uniform set of civil codes led to a more systematized body of law, they were accompanied by appeals from the *ulema*, parliament, journalists, and others for women to determine what their rights were, and to learn how to use them.³⁰

By 1989, a seemingly more uniform set of family laws was comprised out of various sources of law, including the abrogated FPL. A host of legal developments since the 1980s has reinstated many of the old FPL provisions, even the articles that were most offensive to the *ulema*. At first, the state agents appeared intent on revoking Westernized legal codes. Practical concerns, however, overtook the idealism of Khomeini's writings, and over time state officials revisited and reinstated many of the innovations of the FPL Khomeini initially condemned.

Increasingly, laws, regulations, codes, and contracts have moved the concept of divorce away from being the sole and arbitrary purview of men into an arena in which women can express themselves and force men into negotiation. The courts still do not offer women equal rights in marriage dissolution, but they offer an arena in which women can require men to come to the bargaining table, which they could never be compelled to do immediately after the Revolution. Indeed, revolutionary leaders eventually restored the civil courts as a system of adjudication, reestablishing the formal expression of the law through civil codes. Commenting on this apparent reversal, Arjomand notes, “I suspect that before embarking on this project Khomeini and his clerical followers did not realize that the attainment of these goals would entail a legal revolution in Shi'ism. But embark on this project they did, and the legal revolution they initiated was in full swing.”³¹ Mir-Hosseini also notes that “[i]t is interesting to note that the *ulema* did not openly challenge the secularization of the law when

governments started to introduce reforms which severely limited the scope of the shari'a."³²

The significant effects of both a) the blending of Islamic principles with civil codes, and b) the reinstatement of municipal family courts require petitioners to engage as autonomous individual actors seeking redress in the form of rights. Legal scholars of liberalism have shown the individuating effect of codification and civil law in other settings.³³ The difficulty of a return to collectives and feminine qualities of nurturing was turned on its head because of the lack of institutional formalism envisioned by the leaders of the Revolution. The combining of *shariah* and civil law was a reflection of the compromises emerging among the disparate groups after the Revolution. It also demonstrated that the national body that emerged after the Revolution was not quite yet Khomeini's vision of true Islamic government. The courts became and continue to serve as an important venue for women seeking redress from numerous grievances. The legal procedures put into place since the Revolution revert back to positioning women as individual, autonomous actors seeking rights: precisely what the revolutionary leaders railed against. Now, however, citing Khomeini's and other revolutionary leaders' appeal to women to seek justice, as Fatima did, and to speak out against injustice, both reformists and principalists alike lay claim to Khomeini's legacy on improving women's status in post-revolutionary Iran.

Conclusion

Khomeini's legacy is a contradictory one, where in Iran today we find two very different scenes displaying the outcomes of the revolutionary discourse of raising women's status in Iran. On the one hand, the conference on Women and Islamic Awakening demonstrates Iran's attempt at moving women's roles to defining the meaning of the Islamic state. On the other hand, women appearing on national television, physically emulating Khomeini's image of the "perfect woman" in their chador, openly question other foundational principles of women's roles in the Islamic republic. By asking whether all women should have children, they challenge post-revolutionary women's exemplary status as nurturer par excellence.

Khomeini's legacy remains very much the site of dispute and discord among the religious groups vying for power in Iran today. Both reformists and principalists claim Khomeini's legacy as theirs, and chart out distinct approaches to contemporary understandings of women's roles in Iranian society. In recent years, reformist Mohammad Khatami emerged as the champion of women's rights, aiming to give women, whose support clinched his two presidential victories, a voice in the political process as he encouraged both the establishment of the rule of law and women's participation in both political and legal processes. As president, Khatami elevated the Bureau for Women's Participation to a cabinet-level position, and used his resources to engage Iran to ratify the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, a move that failed only in the Council of Guardians after it had been approved by Iran's parliament. In 2005, when Iran's first non-cleric came into the presidency, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad sought to focus on women's status as mothers and wives. One of his first acts was to reduce the funding of the Center for Women's Participation, as it was then known, and change its name to the Center for Woman and Family Affairs, indicating the shift in agenda from political participation to motherhood and family, focusing on women's nurturing capacities. Today, both reformists and principalists lay claim to Khomeini's legacy in justifying their agendas for women.

1 The conference was the third in the series on Islamic awakening in Tehran. The first International Conference on Islamic Awakening was held in Tehran in September 2011, with a reported 700 attendees from 80 countries. There, the participants decided to establish the World Assembly of Islamic Awakening. Following that, Tehran hosted the second International Youth and Islamic Awakening in January 2012, in recognition of the importance of the youth in these movements; an Islamic Awakening conference attended by about 1,200 young Muslims and 1,500 scholars and experts from 73 countries.

2 Among the participants were Ali Akbar Velayati, the secretary-general of the World Assembly of Islamic Awakening and an advisor to Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei; commander of Iran's Basij Forces, Brigadier General Mohammad-Reza Naqdi; and chairman of the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq, Seyyed Ammar al-Hakim.

3 *Iran Daily*, July 12, 2012, retrieved from <http://www.irandailybrief.com/2012/07/12/khamenei-addressed-the-women-and-islamic-awakening-conference>. Accessed November, 2012.

4 *Ibid.*

5 I was in Iran in the summer of 2012, and watched both the conference and the television program on Iranian television broadcasts.

6 Ruhollah Khomeini, in Hamid Algar (ed., tr.), *Islam and Revolution I: Writings and Declarations of Imam Khomeini (1941–1980)* (Berkeley: Mizan Press, 1981), p. 441.

7 Khomeini's condemnation of the Family Protection Law was later published as a legal ruling in *Resaleh Towzih al-Masael*, his book on clarifications of religious questions.

8 Moojan Momen, *An introduction to Shi'i Islam* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985), p. 285.

[9](#) I conducted research for a project on discourses of women's rights in Iran. I undertook fieldwork in Tehran from January 1999 to March 2000, with annual follow-up trips throughout 2006. During this time, I conducted more than 200 interviews with women about their perceptions of rights before, during, and after the revolution. I conducted participant observation in family and custody courts, scriptural reading groups, law offices, and other venues, such as the Islamic Human Rights Commission in Tehran.

[10](#) Data used in this article comes from the interviews I conducted during fieldwork from 1999 to 2000 and annual follow-up trips. See [note 8](#).

[11](#) All names are pseudonyms to protect the identity of respondents.

[12](#) Baqer Moin, "Khomeini's Search for Perfection: Theory and Reality" in Ali Rahnema (ed.), *Pioneers of Islamic Revival* (New York: Zed Press, 2005), second edition, pp. 64–97.

[13](#) For an analysis of the shift in discourse from Khatami's attention to women's participation in civil society and political life to women's attention to their roles as mothers and wives, see Arzoo Osanloo, "What a Focus on 'Family' means in the Islamic Republic of Iran" in Maaïke Voorhoeve (ed.), *Family Law in Islam: Divorce, Marriage and Women in the Muslim World* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2012), pp. 51–76.

[14](#) Minoo Moallem, *Between Warrior Brother and Veiled Sister: Islamic Fundamentalism and the Politics of Patriarchy in Iran* (University of California Press, 2005), p. 90.

[15](#) Janet Afary, *Sexual Politics in Modern Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

[16](#) Morteza Mutahhari, *The Rights of Women in Islam* (Tehran: World Organisation for Islamic Services, 1981), p. 135.

[17 Ibid.](#), p. 135.

[18 Ibid.](#)

[19](#) Ruhollah Khomeini, *Sahife-ye Nur*, vol. i, p. 27, cited in Juliana Shaw and Behrooz Arezoo (eds.), *The Position of Women from the Viewpoint of Imam Khomeini* (Tehran: Institute for the Compilation and Publication of Imam Khomeini's Work, 2001).

[20](#) Iranian Constitution, 1989.

[21](#) "Some of Imam Khomeini's Remarks Made at a Gathering of Ladies on the Occasion of Woman's Day," 12 March 1985, *Sahife-ye Nur*, vol. xix, p. 120, cited in *The Position of Women from the Viewpoint of Imam Khomeini*, pp. 23–24.

[22](#) Kate Millett, *Going to Iran* (New York: Coward, McCaan and Geoghegan, 1993), pp. 209, 245, 333.

[23](#) Moallem, *Between Warrior Brother and Veiled Sister*.

[24](#) Some of Imam Khomeini's remarks made in a meeting with a group of sisters on the occasion of Woman's Day, March 2, 1986, *Sahife-ye Nur*, vol. xix, p. 279, cited in *The Position of Women from the Viewpoint of Imam Khomeini*.

[25](#) Richard Cottam, "The Iranian Revolution" in Juan R. Cole and Nikkie R. Keddie (eds.), *Shi'ism and Social Protest* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1986), p. 71.

[26](#) Arzoo Osanloo, *The Politics of Women's Rights in Iran* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

[27](#) Khomeini, *Islam and Revolution I*.

[28](#) Said Amir Arjomand, *The Turban for the Crown: The Islamic Revolution in Iran* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 184.

[29](#) *Ibid.*

[30](#) Afsaneh Najmabadi, "Feminism in an Islamic Republic: Years of Hardship, Years of Growth" in Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and Jon L. Esposito (eds.), *Islam, Gender and Social Change* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

[31](#) Arjomand, *The Turban for the Crown*, p. 184.

[32](#) Ziba Mir-Hosseini, *Marriage on Trial: A Study of Islamic Family Law* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1993), p. 12.

[33](#) For example, see Peter Fitzpatrick, *The Mythology of Modern Law* (London: Routledge, 1992); Michael W. McCann, *Rights at Work: Pay Equity Reform and the Politics of Legal Mobilization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); and Sally Merry, "Rights Talk and the Experience of Law: Implementing Women's Human Rights to Protection from Violence," *Human Rights Quarterly*, Issue 25 (2003), pp. 343–381.

11 To Rule, or Not to Rule? An Alternative Look at the Political Life of Ayatollah Khomeini between 1960 and 1980

Sadegh Zibakalam

There is a consensus among both supporters and opponents of the late Ayatollah Khomeini that he was set to rule: when he first began his political life in the early 1960s through to the early 1980s, when, for all intents and purposes, he actually did emerge as the undisputed ruler of the Islamic Republic within the context of *Velayat-e Faqih* (guardianship of the jurist). His supporters argue that from the time he launched his struggle against the late Shah of Iran, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi (1919–1980), in the 1960s, Ayatollah Khomeini was determined to establish a clerical state in Iran. They have several fundamental arguments to support their claim. First and foremost, they cite Khomeini's theory of the *Velayat-e Faqih*; a theory he developed during his exile in Najaf in Iraq (1964–1978) and taught to elite students that would go on to form the Islamic Republic. The theory postulates that during the absence or “occultation” of the Shi'i Twelfth Imam, which began in the ninth century (874 CE), a top-ranking Shi'i cleric or *Vali-e Faqih* was obligated to rule the Shi'i community until his reappearance. This idea had been raised by Shi'i scholars since the occultation, but for the most part remained a broadly theoretical subject, and not a definitive religious decree to be abided by Shi'i in the absence of the Twelfth Imam. According to Khomeini's interpretation, however, a high-ranking Shi'i theologian or *faqih* enjoys the same authority enjoyed by the Twelfth Imam. Ayatollah Khomeini's interpretation of the concept of *Velayat-e Faqih* ultimately leads to the absolute power of the ruling *faqih* and the state being governed by the clergy under the supervision of the *faqih*.

Iranian leaders, the state media, religious scholars and academics allege that the political model which has evolved in Iran during the past three decades was purposefully designed by Ayatollah Khomeini. They advocate firmly that ever since he launched his campaign against the Shah's regime in the early 1960s, Ayatollah Khomeini was determined to establish the present form of political system which governs Iran. One of the most important “proofs” of their claim is his famous thesis on the concept of *Velayat-e Faqih* as indicated. But it has to be noted that the Ayatollah did not actually write the thesis himself. He lectured the idea of government by a *faqih* during the absence of the Twelfth Shi'i Imam when he was in exile in Najaf, Iraq, in the late 1960s. His lectures were collected by some of his students and subsequently published in a book entitled *Velayat-e Faqih*. The publication took place in Beirut with the help of Iranian Shi'is who lived there and were critical of the Shah's regime.¹ The book was then smuggled into Iran during the early 1970s, and circulated among some of the more radical clergy in Qom and other centers of scholarly learning. The circulation wasn't very widespread, nor can it be said that many Iranians had read it by the time of the Revolution in the late 1970s.² Nevertheless, many supporters of Khomeini's concept of *Velayat-e Faqih* firmly advocate that the book was the manifesto for the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Many also argue that the system has roots in the period prior to the late 1960s and early 1970s, and regard Khomeini's book written during the early 1940s under the title of *Kashf-e Asrar* as the prelude to his determination to establish *Velayat-e Faqih* in Iran.³

It is not only Ayatollah Khomeini's staunch supporters who firmly believe that he was determined

from the beginning to establish a clerical state in Iran under the doctrine of *Velayat-e Faqih*; many of the opponents of the Islamic Republic believe so, as well. They argue that he was determined to rule the country after the fall of the Shah and establish a clerical regime in Iran. Moreover, they suggest that the Ayatollah maneuvered towards his ultimate goal along several carefully planned stages. He disguised his real motives, they argue, “duping” Iranians and the opposition leaders during the Revolution to imagine that he was simply a benevolent pious religious leader who desired nothing for himself, and opposed the Shah only because of his suppressive regime. They refer to various statements made by Ayatollah Khomeini before the Revolution in which he had implied that he did not seek to rule, and that his only aim was to get rid of the Shah.

Moreover, they add that the Ayatollah appointed a Revolutionary Council as well as a government headed by Mehdi Bazargan, a liberal technocrat, as further evidence for his desire to rule. Both of these institutions were staffed by moderate clergy as well as liberal figures.⁴ On the face of it, setting up these institutions corresponded with the Ayatollah’s indications in the late 1970s that he would rebuke a role in government after the fall of the Shah. In reality, however, Ayatollah Khomeini ruled firmly after the Revolution. By building the Islamic State in Iran on the basis of *Velayat-e Faqih*, the expectations that neither the clergy nor Ayatollah Khomeini had sought a role in governing after the Revolution proved to be wishful thinking on the part of the more liberal-minded Islamic figures as well as the secular oppositions. In order to explain why the clergy went on to create a theocratic state, they argue that during the preliminary stages of the revolution, Khomeini’s authority was not fully established. He therefore needed the support of the other revolutionary movements. However, these were composed primarily of secularists, Marxists and liberals as well as moderate Islamists that didn’t support the idea of a clerical state, let alone a state ruled exclusively by a *faqih*. Moreover, they add, the Ayatollah did not have the means to govern the country after the fall of the Shah. His clerical supporters lacked the knowledge and expertise to run the country’s bureaucracy, industries, banking system, the armed forces and the rest of the state apparatus. He therefore let the moderate Islamists (led by Bazargan), many of whom were competent technocrats and had acquired the necessary experience working at various levels before the Revolution, to run the country until Ayatollah Khomeini and his clerical aides could manage to do so independently. Thus, the argument goes, the Ayatollah led them to believe that he was not intending to rule, only to bide time for himself and his supporters. After the success of the Revolution and he had reached the stage where he was confident to be able to run the country with his clerical followers, he got rid of liberals and the more moderate Islamists. In short, similar to the supporters of Ayatollah Khomeini, they, too, firmly believe that he was determined to seize power and had carefully planned the invention of a clerical state. This question is central to the disputed legacy of Khomeini in Iran today. The hypothesis put forward in this chapter, however, is that contrary to the positions taken by his supporters and detractors, Ayatollah Khomeini did not have any preconceived plans to establish a clerical state in Iran ruled by the *fuqaha*, nor attain political power himself.

The first major argument in support of the idea that Ayatollah Khomeini intended from the outset to create a state ruled by a *faqih* may be found in the fact that the Islamic Republic of Iran itself exists. In the words of one of the confidants of Ayatollah Khomeini, and a prominent clerical-politician of post-revolutionary Iran, “[T]he fact that Islamic Iran has eventually turned into a state to be governed by a *Faqih* is tantamount to the solid proof, if there was any need for it, that our beloved leader [Ayatollah Khomeini] had that in mind right from the start of his holy struggle against the infidel Shah and his usurping rule.”⁵ Another close aide of Khomeini argues that the concept of *Velayat-e Faqih* was raised in the Constitutional Assembly (Majlis-e Khobregan), and was subsequently put to a referendum in 1980 under the aegis of Khomeini; both facts that demonstrate that he wanted the newly

established Islamic state to represent the only Shi'i country in the world under the leadership of the *faqih*.⁶ Furthermore, there is the undisputed presence of the clergy in literally every organ of the Islamic Republic. The Supreme Leader is the final arbiter on every issue. His sayings, commands, instructions, opinions, recommendations, views and directives are final. On top of the fact that the heads of state institutions are appointed by the Supreme Leader as per the Islamic Republic's constitution, his representatives are also present in most of these institutions. Because the Supreme Leader's representatives are clergymen, this clerical system has strengthened both the influence as well as the power of the clergy in the entire state apparatus throughout the country. There is virtually no part of the state in Iran that is not governed or influenced in some way by the directives of the Supreme Leader: from the armed forces where he is the commander-in-chief to educational institutions (from primary schools to universities), the arts, entertainment, the media (including the Iranian National Radio and Television, whose director is appointed by him), the judiciary (whose various heads are appointed by him) and so on. On top of officials that are appointed to head institutions by the Supreme Leader in accordance with the constitution, there are a host of other representatives of the Supreme Leader's present in various other areas. Although these representatives are not mentioned in the constitution, sometimes they carry more weight and exert more influence than the actual or nominal head of a particular institution that is appointed either by the president or another senior official. It is against this backdrop that both the supporters as well as the opponents of Ayatollah Khomeini firmly maintain that the present system governing the state was carefully designed and institutionalized by him. They refute any suggestion that Ayatollah Khomeini did not plan the entire system which has evolved in Iran during the past three decades.

But in actual fact, the underlying causes which turned Khomeini to politics and convinced him to enter the struggle against the Shah's regime were not related to establishing a rule of the supreme jurist in Iran. There are three broad sets of reasons that I would like to discuss in order to demonstrate that Ayatollah Khomeini was not aiming to establish *Velayat-e Faqih* in Iran from the outset. The first is related to the Ayatollah's political life since he emerged as an oppositional political figure in the early 1960s. The second pertain to the Ayatollah's political ideas from when he was sent into exile in 1964 until the early stages of the revolution in the late 1970s. Third, and finally, there is the issue of the complex political developments which took place in Iran after the Revolution in 1979. The combination of these three periods shows that both the establishment of *Velayat-e Faqih* as well as the incorporation of clerical rule into the state apparatus were the results of the post-revolutionary conditions in Iran rather than a carefully planned plan implemented by Ayatollah Khomeini many years prior.

Let me start with the Ayatollah's early political life. Ruhollah Khomeini was born in 1902 to a clerical family in a small town called Khomein, some 250 kilometers south of Tehran on the edge of the great central desert in the center of Iran.⁷ His father, grandfather and great-grandfather were all clerics. His father, Mustafa, was killed during a dispute with the local landlord when he was in his mid-40s, when Ruhollah was only six months old. Others have argued that his father was killed by armed bandits during a period when Khomeini's mother was pregnant with a fifth child, Mohammad.⁸ Whatever the cause of Mustafa's death, the financial conditions of his family did not improve after his departure. To assist the family during the period of crisis, Ruhollah's aunt moved to live with them, and played a major role in bringing up the orphaned toddler. As he grew up, the plight of Khomein, like that of the rest of the country, turned from bad to worse, as Iran was torn apart by a civil war between constitutionalists and the monarchy (1906–1908). His aunt sent him to the local *maktab* when he was four. There he was taught how to read and write Arabic, and studied the holy Quran. Soon, young Ruhollah reached the stage where he had to pursue his education beyond the small town of

Khomein. When he was sixteen, his aunt sent him to the nearby city of Arak. There he studied Shi'i theology, primarily with Sheikh Mohsen Araki. After three years, he impressed his teacher to the point that the latter introduced him to the most senior cleric in Arak, Ayatollah Abdulkarim Haeri Yazdi, a leading Shi'i scholar. Two years later, in 1920, Mulla Mohammad Kazem Khorasani – the Grand Ayatollah in Iran who was living in Qom – died, leaving Haeri as his heir apparent. He was invited by the senior clergy in Qom to move from Arak to that city. During the two years that Ruhollah was studying under Ayatollah Haeri in Arak, he had impressed him so much that his mentor asked him to accompany him to Qom. In Qom, he became one of Haeri's most distinguished disciples.

Haeri's years in Qom as the leading Shi'i scholar coincided with Reza Shah's dictatorship (1925–1941). Both the Grand Ayatollah (Haeri) and his disciple (Khomeini) were affected by Reza Shah's vehement anti-clericalism and secularism, which was partially inspired by the Turkish leader Mustafa Kemal (Ataturk). Khomeini, in particular, bitterly observed the monarch's anti-Islamic measures. But Ayatollah Haeri was essentially a quietist cleric, and tried to stay away from politics. Despite Khomeini's vehement criticism of Reza Shah's ruthless behavior towards religious dissidents, he nevertheless followed a quiet life, shunning politics and concentrating on his theological studies. The period of calm which Haeri created in Qom was ideal for a purely academic life. It was during these years, the 1930s, that Khomeini succeeded in becoming a *mujtahid* and shared Haeri's interest in Islamic mysticism (*'irfan*) and love of poetry. Ayatollah Haeri had a strong passion for Hafez, the great fourteenth-century Iranian poet whose brilliant mystical poems have been enjoyed by Iranians for generations. The young Khomeini did not inherit his teacher's apolitical nature, but he did develop an interest in both poetry and *'irfan*. So taken was Khomeini by Hafez, that he actually composed a number of his own poems.⁹

In 1929, Khomeini married the daughter of Ayatollah Saqafi, the head of a respected clerical family from Tehran. Two years later, his first child, Mustafa, was born. The choice of name for his son perhaps indicates that the absence of his father had impacted Khomeini during the earlier part of his life, even though he never made an issue of it. Ayatollah Haeri died in 1937, leaving the Shi'i hierarchy in Qom (now the main center for Shi'i theological studies in Iran, where the most senior *ulema* resided) effectively without clerical leadership. To some extent, Ayatollah Abol-Hasan Isfahani occupied the most senior position. Unlike with Haeri, Khomeini was not particularly close to Isfahani and carried on with his studies without getting too closely involved with the new clerical leader.

The Allied occupation of Iran in 1941, followed by the fall of Reza Shah and his subsequent exile to South Africa by the British for his indirect alliance with the Germans, rapidly changed the political climate in Iran. A period of political freedom prevailed in the country during which various social and political trends began to emerge. Amongst the political trends which formed in the post-Reza Shah era were those derived from religious currents, which were on the rise. Some religious figures, including a number of senior clergy, also entered into politics. Surprisingly, Khomeini stayed clear of politics even during this period (1940–1953). Because this pattern is repeated in Khomeini's later life in the 1950s, it is important to understand why he did not enter into politics during times of massive political transition and upheaval.

To begin with, the fall of Reza Shah and the emergence of a completely new political climate in Iran, as well as a series of economic hardships including severe shortages of food and other essential commodities due to the war, superseded other issues including trying to find a Grand Ayatollah to fill the void in Qom left by the late Haeri. With the death of Ayatollah Isfahani in 1946 and the end of the Second World War, some degree of normality began to return to the country. It was during this time

that Ayatollah Seyyed Mohammad Hussein Borujerdi was invited to Qom from the small town of Borujerd, 600 kilometers South-West of Tehran. Khomeini, who had by now become an established cleric in his own right, played an important part in paving the way for Ayatollah Borujerdi's arrival in Qom. With the absence of a *marja-e taqlid* (source of emulation) in Qom, it seemed that Khomeini was anxious that the city could potentially lose the scholastic momentum which it had developed under the leadership of Ayatollah Haeri.¹⁰ In other words, the fate of Qom as a prestigious theological center for Shi'is was more important for Khomeini than becoming involved in politics. But there was still another underlying reason that his political apprehension persisted until the early 1960s. It appears that Khomeini strongly believed and respected the clerical hierarchy which existed in Qom. With regards to politics, he followed the line adopted by successive clerical leaderships in Qom, and refused to challenge their authorities. Just as both Haeri and Isfahani had shunned politics, Khomeini would also.

The same largely apolitical behavior would prevail under the leadership of Borujerdi after he settled in Qom in the late 1940s. Once settled in Qom, Ayatollah Borujerdi soon eclipsed his peers. By the mid-1950s, he had become the sole *marja-e taqlid* of his generation. But despite his enormous influence both in Qom and throughout the country, he followed a political path similar to those of his predecessors. Although part of this period coincided with the huge turmoil of Mossadegh and the era of oil nationalization, he remained explicitly unimpressed by what went on in Tehran. Presumably to Khomeini's dismay, as his subsequent behavior showed, Ayatollah Borujerdi instructed the clergy in Qom to stay away from politics.¹¹ Fearing that involvement by the clerics in politics would bring harm and chaos to the religious center of Iran, he even arranged a national gathering of some 2,000 clergy in Qom in order to explicitly urge them not to enter politics.¹² There were, however, marked differences between the political conditions during the tenure of Ayatollah Borujerdi's and that of his predecessors. These differences were carefully observed by Khomeini. To the *ulema*, including Ayatollah Khomeini, Reza Shah was perceived as an enemy; a powerful tyrant who stopped at nothing in order to banish the influence of the clerical strata of Iranian society. In contrast, Mohammad Reza Shah – certainly until the end of the 1950s – had no quarrel with the *ulema*. He rarely instigated against them, or showed any contempt for them in the same way that his father had. For this reason, Ayatollah Borujerdi did not feel any hostility to the Shah. Moreover, an underlying factor forged even a tacit alliance between the monarch and the Grand Ayatollah against the Tudeh party. Since his accession to the throne in 1941, the main threat to the Shah had been from Tudeh, and to a lesser degree from Mossadegh and his National Front Coalition (Jebhey-e Melli), neither of which were particularly admired in Qom, and even less so by Khomeini. Given the atheism and secularism of Tudeh, Khomeini's disdain for them was obvious. But his opposition to Mossadegh requires some explanation, especially given the latter's immense popularity and opposition to the Shah. Despite Mossadegh's anti-British attitudes and the broad nature of his democratic movement, Khomeini neither in the 1950s nor after the Islamic Revolution showed particularly great respect or affections towards the nationalist leader. Mossadegh and his National Front struck the Ayatollah as a secular movement. The fall of Mossadegh in 1953 by the military coup engineered by the CIA and British MI6, and the subsequent heavy-handed suppression of both his supporters as well as thousands of the Tudeh party followers thus did not irk the clerical establishment in Qom. Qom perceived the Mossadegh overthrow as the end of two powerful threats: first a real and dangerous threat posed by the popular and efficiently organized Marxist Tudeh party, and second, a potential threat by a liberal and secular popular movement which manifested itself in the leadership of Mossadegh.

Politics aside, Ayatollah Borujerdi used his position to further develop the importance of Qom as the main center of classical Shi'i scholarship – an aim shared by Khomeini. It was very much this side

of Ayatollah Borujerdi – and not his political aloofness – as the consolidator of Qom as the center for Islamic learning in the Shi'i world which appealed to Khomeini. Throughout the duration of Ayatollah Borujerdi's leadership, similar to the Haeri era, Khomeini lived a normal scholastic life; partly studying, partly teaching, at the same time moving up the clerical hierarchy in Qom. By the time of the death of Ayatollah Boroujerdi in 1961, Khomeini had ascended to the status of being a *mujtahid*, attaining the rank of Ayatollah. It is from 1961 that Ayatollah Khomeini rapidly moved in the direction for which he subsequently came to be known. Prior to 1961, Khomeini demonstrated no indication that he wished to establish *Velayat-e Faqih* in Iran, nor that he believed the clergy ought to rule. Nevertheless, a book which was published by him around the mid-1940s called *Kashf-e Asrar – The Unveiling of Secrets* – is often cited as proof that he believed in instituting *Velayat-e Faqih* and the rule of the clergy.¹³ But such an interpretation of *Kashf-e Asrar* is quite misleading, as the text itself does not suggest that the Ayatollah believed in the necessity of establishing a religious state in Iran, let alone a political system ruled by the clergy. In the words of one American scholar and an expert on Khomeini's political thought, "[T]he book is essentially a detailed, systematic critique of an anti-religious tract, but it also contains numerous passages that are overtly political and critical of the Pahlavi rule."¹⁴

The publication of the book occurred partly as a response to Reza Shah's anti-Islamic measures and partly as a response to Ahmad Kasravi and other anti-clerical writers at the time. It has been previously mentioned that the overthrow of Reza Shah created a relaxed political climate in Iran. Amongst the other political and social trends that emerged during this period where the tendency of some writers to publically criticize Islam and the *ulema*. One such writer was Ahmad Kasravi, who was assassinated by a radical Islamic group that would become known as Fedayan-e Islam (Devotees of Islam). Kasravi's inflammatory writings had gained him fame, particularly among the many educated Iranians that read his works. Another anti-religious writer, Ali Dashti, wrote a well-known book called *The Secret of a Thousand Years*. Ayatollah Khomeini himself described his *Kashf-e Asrar* as a reply to Dashti's book, hence its title.¹⁵ His next political writing appeared three decades later under the title of *Velayat-e Faqih*. In short, and contrary to what his supporters advocate, the Ayatollah showed no penchant either for *Velayat-e Faqih* or the establishment of an Islamic state run by the clergy. In fact, it can be said that he followed a largely apolitical life during this period.

It was after the death of the Borujerdi in March 1961 that Ayatollah Khomeini developed a markedly radical stance in opposition to the state. His first confrontation with the regime occurred over the question of who would lead the Shi'i community in Iran following the death of the country's only *marja-e taqlid*. The regime sought to promote a shift of leadership from Qom to Najaf in an effort to nullify the potential of political challenges emerging from the seminaries in Iran. Although the leadership of Borujerdi had hardly caused any difficulty for the authorities in Tehran, the religious authority of the Grand Ayatollah in Iran was nevertheless seen to pose a potential danger. The Shah was increasingly moving towards an autocratic style of government, and he therefore did not wish to risk the emergence of any potential rival within the country. The Shah was quick to send a long telegram to Ayatollah Seyyed Mohsen Hakim in Najaf, offering his condolences for the loss of Borujerdi. As the head of the only Shi'i state in the world, the Shah's gesture was purposefully greatly symbolic. It implied that Ayatollah Hakim was now deemed to be the most eminent religious authority in the Shi'i world following the demise of Borujerdi. On the face of it, the Shah's gesture did not explicitly disrespect the *ulema* in Qom, because at the time of Ayatollah Borujerdi's death there was no religious authority in Iran that could claim parity with Hakim. This was an ideal situation for the regime, but it posed a headache for Ayatollah Khomeini, who feared that in the absence of a *marja-e taqlid* in Iran, the monarch might be tempted to bring about policies that were not compatible with

Islamic principles. His fears proved to be warranted. The Shah embarked on policies which soon led him into direct confrontation with Khomeini. One could ask of course if Khomeini would have opposed the Shah so vehemently if the Shah did not try to implement his “reform” program, which threatened the role of the clergy in society. My contention is that with or without the Shah’s reforms, the Ayatollah was determined to confront the regime, and was waiting for an opportunity in the aftermath of Ayatollah Borujerdi’s death to do so. In view of the depoliticized atmosphere which prevailed in Qom, the Ayatollah needed a pretext with which he could mobilize other *ulema*, as well. One should not forget that for decades, under the leadership of Ayatollahs Haeri, Isfahani and finally Borujerdi, Qom followed a depoliticized tradition. Ayatollah Khomeini was determined to alter this trend.

Almost a year after Ayatollah Borujerdi’s death, Khomeini seized his opportunity. In preparation for a general election in September 1962, the Shah’s regime announced a bill for the provincial council elections. Although it presented a mere formality and initially sparked limited opposition, the Ayatollah was quick to react. The bill had not made it mandatory for electors or candidates to be Muslim. Moreover, the customary procedure by the candidate to take an oath on the holy Quran had been omitted. The electoral bill had also envisaged women’s suffrage. After the bill was published in newspapers, Khomeini immediately arranged for a meeting with two other leading Ayatollahs in Qom – Mohammad Reza Golpayegani and Mohammad Kazem Shariatmadari – to discuss the proposed bill. The three decided to send a telegram to the Shah to express their disapproval. In addition, they agreed to write and contact other *ulema* throughout the country in order to muster support against the government’s agenda. Finally, upon the persuasion of Ayatollah Khomeini, they agreed to disclose to the public the text of their protest message to the Shah.¹⁶ The Shah replied to the telegram a week later. He refused to address them by their proper titles of Ayatollah, thereby re-emphasizing the point he had already made in the aftermath of the death of Ayatollah Borujerdi: that he did not recognize the *ulema* in Qom as legitimate religious authorities. The Shah also drew the attention of the *ulema* to the conditions of the other Islamic states, thereby indicating that women had the right to vote in some of them. Finally, the monarch had stated that he had referred the matter to the government. The *ulema* then took the decision to send a telegram to Prime Minister Asadollah Alam. In this telegram, Ayatollah Khomeini widened the dispute with the government. He complained about the closure of the Majlis (Iranian parliament), and accused the government of purposefully attempting to introduce bills that were against the *shariah* and constitution. He warned that the *ulema* would not remain silent on issues that were against Islam. The other *ulema* only accompanied the Ayatollah in their first protest telegram. Fearing government reprisals to Ayatollah Khomeini’s provocative tone, they avoided sending further telegrams to the Prime Minister and Shah.¹⁷ In sharp contrast to the other *ulema*, Ayatollah Khomeini remained belligerent and sent two more telegrams to the Shah and Alam. In his telegram to the Shah, he advised the monarch not to trust those who were serving him, in spite of the pledges of loyalty that they had given. This was a clear reference to the prime minister and his cabinet. He accused them of trying to attribute their anti-religious and anti-constitutional measures to His Majesty. He ended the telegram by stating that if appropriate measures were not taken, he would go further to raise other issues with his Majesty in an open letter. In his second telegram to Alam, the Ayatollah took a much tougher line. He warned the prime minister that he was mistaken if he thought that by approving bills which were inappropriate and against the constitution he could pave the way for the enemies of Islam and Iran. He urged Alam to obey God and the constitution; otherwise, the premier was warned, the *ulema* would not refrain from confronting him.

The two telegrams were soon circulated among thousands across the country. To address the monarch and his prime minister in such a tone was unprecedented, and marked a completely new kind

of interaction with the regime. The Ayatollah's reputation rapidly rose across the country, as his telegrams moved from one hand to another. In less than two months, Ayatollah Khomeini had been transformed into a national hero in Iran. Inspired by his courage, hundreds of clerics in other parts of the country were now voicing their opposition to the bill. Whilst many had not at first taken any notice of the bill and were unaware of its specifics, they joined the queue to condemn it. Soon the entire opposition, including Mossadegh's supporters and the Nationalists, Nehzate Azadi (headed by Mehdi Bazargan), *bazaaris* and leftist students were all condemning the bill. The regime, which could never have anticipated how such a trivial issue could become a nationwide crisis, backed down as the protests widened. Alam sent a telegram to the three leading *ulema* of Qom – Golpayegani, Najafi-Mar'ashi and Shariatmadari – indicating that the bill would be radically altered. He deliberately ignored Ayatollah Khomeini, implying that the government did not recognize him as a significant political figure or religious authority. His omission only added to the Ayatollah's popularity. Some of the *ulema* in Qom, including these three, were inclined to end the campaign given that the government had promised to review the bill. But Khomeini insisted that they must carry on their campaign until the government withdrew the bill completely. He managed to persuade them to continue their campaign. A week later, Alam sent a second telegram to the three stating the government had abandoned the bill. Reluctant to see the matter to an end, Ayatollah Khomeini insisted that the text of the government's telegram ought to be published by the prime minister's office in the newspapers before they declared the matter was resolved. Golpayegani, Najafi-Mar'ashi and Shariatmadari disagreed, and this time they managed to prevail over Khomeini's will to confront the government. The three sent a polite telegram to the Shah expressing their gratitude to His Majesty. The victory brought a huge crowd to Qom. Hundreds of students and oppositional figures came to Qom to pay their respects to the *ulema*, and in particular to Ayatollah Khomeini. Khomeini was now a national figure, and henceforth the Shah's opponents would look to him for leadership.

Ayatollah Khomeini's dispute with the government increased in the coming months, and his attack on the government became more and more bitter and vociferous. More importantly, Khomeini began increasingly addressing and attacking the monarch himself in his speeches and statements. Less than a year after the dispute over the electoral bill in June 1963, the regime decided to arrest Khomeini and brought him to Tehran. The move provoked two days of street protests by thousands of the Ayatollah's supporters in Tehran, Qom and other cities. The regime confronted the demonstrators by bringing out the army and declaring martial law. As a result, hundreds of demonstrators were killed and injured. Many were arrested, and dozens of the Ayatollah's students and clerical figures were also detained. Some were expelled from Qom and exiled to other cities, and two of the Ayatollah's supporters were put to trial by a military court charged with subverting the state, and were subsequently executed. The uprising, which has been commemorated as a national holiday since the victory of the revolution of 1979, is perceived by many Islamists as well as the Islamic government itself as the start or prelude to the Islamic Revolution itself. Along with two other senior clergy, Ayatollahs Qumi and Mahalati, Ayatollah Khomeini was released from jail after ten months. He was received upon his return to Qom amid a tumultuous welcome by thousands of his supporters. Scores of opposition figures, including student activists and political prisoners released from jail, travelled to Qom to visit him. The Ayatollah had become the *de facto* leader of the regime's opposition movement. Eventually, the Shah's regime decided to exile him first to Turkey, and subsequently to Iraq in 1965, six months after his release from prison. He remained in Najaf until he departed for France in 1978, after Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein decided to expel him.

At this stage, it seems appropriate to return to the original question which was posed at the beginning of this chapter: what were the motives of Ayatollah Khomeini in rising against the Shah?

As noticed, many of Ayatollah Khomeini's supporters as well the Islamic Republic's official narrative maintains that the Ayatollah's broad and underlying objective in opposing the Shah from the beginning was to establish *Velayat-e Faqih* in Iran. However, in researching his movement from the start until the early 1980s when the system of *Velayat-e Faqih* was being consolidated in Iran, a more nuanced picture emerges. It is true that *Velayat-e Faqih* was established through a referendum in 1980 in which a substantial part of the Iranian population voted in its favor. But a closer examination reveals that Khomeini may not have led the revolution with a firm plan to establish the rule of the *faqih*. In 2009, a book was published in Iran which presents an interview with Ayatollah Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, a former President of the Islamic Republic and one of the staunchest supporters of Khomeini. Rafsanjani had been associated with Khomeini since the early days in 1961, when Khomeini first launched his campaign against the Shah. He was amongst the first of Ayatollah Khomeini's students who was arrested in 1961, and remained close to him until 1989 when Khomeini died. Several important issues have been raised in this book concerning Rafsanjani's political life before and after the Revolution. Amongst them is the question which has been raised in this chapter: what were the aims of Khomeini and other Ayatollahs and religious scholars who followed him from the beginning?¹⁸ Rafsanjani's response echoes the official narrative held by the Islamic Republic: the Shah wanted to embark on a series of anti-Islamic policies after the death of Borujerdi; the regime sought closer ties with the West (particularly the United States and Israel); the Shah wished for the development of Qom to stagnate; and finally, the Ayatollah's underlying aim was to establish *Velayat-e Faqih* in Iran. Rafsanjani's responses are firmly and thoughtfully disputed in this book. By analyzing the events of the early 1960s, Ayatollah Khomeini's speeches, his criticisms of the regime's conducts, his demands from the regime, and statements the book concludes that at the beginning of his political activism the Ayatollah's objective was neither to establish *Velayat-e Faqih* in Iran nor to empower the clergy to run the country. The book further demonstrates that the Ayatollah's broad objectives were similar to those of other opposition figures.

This question is central to the legacy of Ayatollah Khomeini, and is hotly discussed by many academics and scholars in Iran. In the opinion of the present author, the Shah's White Revolution which has been described as the cause of the Ayatollah's rebellion against him was not anti-Islamic, per se. The most important elements of the Shah's plan were land reform, giving women the right to vote and stand for parliamentary elections, giving workers a special dividend of the profits earned by factory owners, dispatching high school graduate military conscripts to villages to educate their inhabitants and similar steps. Whether or not these reforms were genuine steps in changing the social and economic structure of Iran is beyond our analysis. My contention is that they cannot be described as irreligious or anti-Islamic. Khomeini's difficulty with the White Revolution did not emerge because it was anti-Islamic. Rather, his opposition developed due to the progressive nature of the reforms. Already, some landlords, a few clerics and a number of political figures within the regime who were either landlords themselves or came from a similar background had begun lining up against the land reforms. If the Ayatollah were to attack the reforms for whatever reason, he would have automatically ended up sharing the same platform with them, a position the Ayatollah was very careful to avoid. The Shah's regime had already launched a series of attacks against the opponents of the bill, accusing them of being reactionaries and supporting the landed aristocracy. The Ayatollah was confronted with the same dilemma which the nationalist, secular and liberal oppositions had been through over the White Revolution: how to attack the regime without being accused of opposing the reforms. Contrary to what has been attributed to him since, Ayatollah Khomeini neither described the reforms as anti-Islamic nor expressed his explicit opposition to them. His concerns were far narrower. In his own words, he was contemplating "how to expose the regime and how to remove the

reformist and progressive deception which the Shah had hidden behind it. If we could only make the people aware, so that they would not be deceived by the Shah's deceptive programs, then we would defeat the Shah ultimately."¹⁹ In short, the motives and reasons of Khomeini's move against the Shah were essentially similar to the rest of the regime's opposition. During this crucial period, he did not seek to overthrow the monarchy or replace it with an Islamic regime. His criticisms were over the regime's dictatorial conduct: he accused the Shah of violating the constitution, shooting at innocent demonstrators, carrying out torture against political detainees, failing to carry out fair and free elections, lack of press freedom, freedom of expression and preventing the formation of independent political parties.

In one of his famous speeches before he was exiled from Iran, the Ayatollah stated that the clergy did not want to rule, nor did they desire to overthrow the monarchy. They only sought to supervise the rule of law, and for the Shah to abide by the constitution.²⁰ This approach continued during the next fourteen years when the Ayatollah was in Iraq. He occasionally issued statements which criticized the regime's conduct and policies. His contacts were limited to a few Iranian students that were studying in the West, and some of his students in Qom who secretly visited him in Najaf. He remained a symbolic opposition leader, that is to say, he did not wage a revolutionary struggle against the Shah at this stage. As indicated, in the late 1960s and during a series of his lectures, the Ayatollah discussed the concept of *Velayat-e Faqih*. To all intents and purposes, his aim in discussing this concept could not have been to set a future model for Iran after the Shah was overthrown, as his regime appeared to be powerful enough to last well into the future.

So far I have argued that Ayatollah Khomeini did not forge a revolutionary strategy until the revolution in Iran unfolded between 1978 and 1979. But what about his role in the emergence of the Islamic Republic and the establishment of *Velayet-e Faqih*? Between 1978 and 1979, the Iranian people rose against the Pahlavi regime because it was an autocratic, dictatorial and repressive regime. It held thousands of Iranian students, writers, clergy and intellectuals in prison; used widespread torture against political prisoners; ruled arbitrarily and in violation of the constitution and did not hold free elections. However, the official narrative provided by the Iranian state and its supporters during the past three decades is somewhat different from the explanations above. This narrative of events highlights the importance of Iran's previous dependence on the West in galvanizing opposition to the Shah's regime. It highlights how both the United States and Britain essentially ruled Iran by proxy, and that the Shah had fostered close political and economic ties with Israel, but also that he allowed Western multinational companies to plunder Iran's natural resources such as oil and gas, and that he pursued policies that violated Islamic law and threatened Islamic culture. Iranians, it is held in this narrative, wanted an Islamic Republic to put an end to the Shah's policies of Westernization and the systematic destruction of Islam. They opted for Islam, chose Ayatollah Khomeini as their leader and the latter in turn established *Velayat-e Faqih* which the people wanted and overwhelmingly voted for in a free and fair referendum.

It is true that during the Revolution Iranians shouted *Allahu Akbar* ("God is Great"), and that their cardinal slogan was "independence, freedom, and Islamic Republic." Undoubtedly, Islamic symbols and norms played a prominent role in mobilizing the people and the political and cultural imagination of most Iranians. It is also true that less than two months after the revolution, 98.5 percent of Iranians voted in favor of an Islamic Republic to replace the Pahlavi monarchy. But in the eyes of the majority of Iranians, the idea of an Islamic Republic stood for everything the Shah had prevented them from having. If the Shah had ruled arbitrarily, the leaders of the Islamic Republic would rule in accordance with the law; if the Shah threw into prison everyone who opposed him, the Islamic Republic would provide them with freedom of expression and thought; if there were no free elections

and the Shah's cronies packed his parliament, there would be real elections under the Islamic Republic and people would be free to choose anyone they desired as their representatives in the parliament. In short, the Islam they chose symbolized whatever the previous regime failed to deliver.

As for Ayatollah Khomeini, it is disputable whether or not he took part in the Revolution with a firm plan to rule Iran. Rather, it was the complex political developments after the Revolution that dragged him into leading revolutionary Iran. Shortly after the Referendum in April 1979 (less than two months after the victory of the Revolution) which officially ended the monarchy in Iran and marked the establishment of the Islamic Republic in the country, he decided to return to his beloved Qom following fifteen years of absence. The first prime minister of the newly established Republic, along with a number of Khomeini's aides, disagreed with his departure from Tehran. But Khomeini insisted that he had never intended to stay in the capital and rule. In his view, the members of the Revolutionary Council would act as the national representatives until the election of a proper parliament took place. Furthermore, the provisional government had already been chosen and had started its work: a new constitution was being drafted by a group composed of lawyers familiar with Islamic jurisprudence and senior clergy, and preparations were under way for the elections of a president and parliament. Within this context, Ayatollah Khomeini did not deem it necessary to stay in Tehran. If the revolutionary government required his assistance, they could find him in Qom less than 100 miles away from Tehran.

At this stage, Khomeini was rather more interested in stability, and did not insist on *Velayat-e Faqih*; nor did he put himself forward to dominate the state. It was not long, however, before he was forced to return to Tehran due to the post-revolutionary instability that threatened to plunge the whole country into chaos. Political rivalry amongst various factions in the capital; the systematic rise of radical Islamists who increasingly began to challenge the moderate and liberal revolutionary provisional government of Prime Minister Bazargan; the latter's astonishingly weak stance in the face of its opponents; armed rebellions in Khuzestan, Baluchistan, the Turcoman provinces in the north, Azerbaijan and most importantly of all in Kurdistan; challenges by the Marxists, Mujahedin-e Khalq and other armed militia groups that refused to recognize the government of Bazargan; the formation of the Revolutionary Guards and the revolutionary courts (*komiteh*) which similarly did not obey the official government all served to destabilize the country. The seizure of the U.S. embassy in Tehran was the first outcome of this political chaos, and its immediate casualty was Bazargan's government. In retrospect, it was a serious blow to the moderates. The embassy seizure marked the rise of radical Islamists to power. In the battle between the moderate and radical Islamists, Ayatollah Khomeini increasingly sided with the radicals. As they gained the upper hand in that struggle they took over increasingly powerful positions in the governing institutions of the country. The second disaster for the moderates was the impeachment of the first Iranian president, Abolhasan Bani Sadr, and his escape from Iran to France. The third was an armed rebellion against the Islamic state by the Mujahedin-e Khalq, and the subsequent series of assassinations of many Islamic figures, many of whom were moderates. In the vacuum that ensued, the more radical Islamists prospered and Khomeini was increasingly seen as a force for stabilization. Finally, the Iraqi invasion of Iran in August 1980 was another blow to the moderates in Iran and their vision for a rather more democratic system in Iran. One of the most important political outcomes of the war was to strengthen the position of hardliners at the expense of the more moderate Islamists.

What many advocates of *Velayat-e Faqih* in Iran do not know is that the first draft of the Islamic Constitution in 1980 contained no references to it. But despite its absence, Ayatollah Khomeini approved this draft.²¹ Similarly, he strongly opposed one of his closest clerical aides, Ayatollah Beheshti, standing in the first presidential election. With Khomeini's approval, he would have had a

strong chance to become the president of the country. But Khomeini argued that he only believed in the clergy's involvement in the judiciary, and not in other branches of the state.²² As such, inclusion of the *Velayat-e Faqih* was contextual and not pre-planned. If all the political developments of post-revolutionary Iran are studied more closely and in greater detail, we may get a rather more nuanced picture of the inclusion of *Velayat-e Faqih* in the Iranian Constitution. What is needed in order to analyze Ayatollah Khomeini's enduring legacy more closely is a sober assessment of the circumstances that allowed the radical clergy to dominate the Iranian state.

¹ *Nameh Beh Kashif al-Ghita* (Beirut, 1349 [1970]).

² Abdolrahim Gavahi, *The Islamic Revolution of Iran* (Uppsala: Uppsala University Press Publication, 1988), pp. 147–150.

³ Ruhollah Khomeini, *Islam and Revolution I: Writings and Declarations of Imam Khomeini* (ed., trans. Hamid Algar), (London: KPI Publication, 1985), p.141.

⁴ Mohsen Milani, *The Making of Iran's Islamic Revolution: From Monarchy to Islamic Republic* (trans.) Mojtaba Attarzadeh (Tehran: Game Now Publication, 2006), p.260.

⁵ *15 Khordad: The Specialized Quarterly in the Iranian Contemporary Historical Research*, No. 24–25 (Autumn 1389 [2010]), pp. 125–130.

⁶ Jawadi Amoli, *Islam va Iman* (Qom: Islamic Publications, 2011), pp. 97–101.

⁷ Baqer Moin, *Khomeini: Life of the Ayatollah* (London: I.B.Tauris Publishers, 1999), pp. 9–11.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 11–13.

[9](#) Hamid Rouhani, *Nehazat-e Imam Khomeini* (Qom: N.P. 1356 [1977]), p. 23.

[10](#) *Ibid.*, pp. 71–72.

[11](#) Rasul Jafarian, *Imam Khomeini va Regime-e Shah* (Qom: Sazman-e Tablighat-e Islami, 1381[2000]), pp. 191–207.

[12](#) Bahram Afrasiabi, *Ran va Tarikh: az Coodeta ta Enghelab* (Tehran: Zarrin Publication, 1358 [1979]), p. 345.

[13](#) Hamid Algar, in *Islam and Revolution*, pp. 15–16.

[14](#) *Ibid.*, p. 10.

[15](#) M.D. Qajar (ed.), *Payam-e Enghelab: Majmoo Sokhanraniha, Mosaheb-e ha va Paymhay-e Imam* (Tehran: Payam-e Azadi Publication, 1360 [1981]), pp. 241–242.

[16](#) Rouhani, *Nehazat-e Imam Khomeini*, p. 227.

[17](#) *Ibid.*, p. 227.

[18](#) Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, in *Hashemi Bedon-e Routoosh*, fourth edition, (Tehran: Rouzaneh Publication, 1390 [2011]), pp. 50–69.

[19](#) Jafarian, *Imam Khomeini va Regime-e Shah*, p. 453.

[20](#) Seyyed Ali Mohammadi, *Imam Khomeini va Enghelab Eslami* (Tehran: Shaheed Publication, 1381 [2000]), p. 425.

[21](#) *Hashemi Bedon-e Routoosh*, p. 97.

[22](#) *Shargh*, 29 Morda, 1385 [12 August, 2004].

12 Khomeini and the Decolonization of the Political

S. Sayyid

On this blessed day, the day the Islamic community assumes leadership, the day of the victory and triumph of our people, I declare the Islamic Republic of Iran.¹

Ayatollah Khomeini's proclamation of the Islamic Republic was not an act of a venerable theologian formally sanctifying a new political order. Khomeini proclaimed the Islamic Republic not because he was a senior religious authority, but because he had been instrumental in the overthrow of the Shah and the establishment of an Islamic Republic in Iran. To understand the significance of Khomeini, it is necessary to have an understanding of the articulation between being Muslim and political agency. In this chapter, I will first sketch out the recent history of Muslims as political agents before going on to discuss the role of Khomeini in this process. Before starting, it is necessary to state that one of the main obstacles to any analysis of the kind that I am offering is the way in which Orientalism continues to block any attempt to understand those deemed to be non-Western as being outside the framework of Eurocentrism. In other words, Orientalism contends that a Eurocentric episteme is universal and can unproblematically be deployed to understand non-Western phenomena, by maintaining the hierarchy between Western and Oriental. One of the key tropes of the Eurocentric episteme is precisely the implicit claim that the properly political is a preserve of Western patrimony.

By the political, I do not simply mean the domain of politics that is contained in government or legislative bodies. The political refers to three interconnected elements. Firstly, the political describes a situation in which a public distinction can be made between friends and enemies. Secondly, it describes the moment of decision; that is, the capacity of making rules in the context where there are no rules. Thirdly, the political refers to the institution of the social. Thus, the ability to found and congeal social relations, in other words to institute a society, is a function of the political.² In contrast to the view of societies as political, and transformed through historical struggles, there is the view that some societies are timeless and unchanging, lacking history. People without history are also deemed to be people without the political, and they are by definition non-Western people. Eurocentrism's insistence that political life is only found in the West, and the rest just have cycles of dictatorships and dynasts, continues to dominate analyses or readings of Ayatollah Khomeini's role.

The Revolution against Eurocentrism

The Islamic Revolution in Iran was a revolution against Eurocentrism, not only in that it overthrew a Kemalist pro-Western dictatorship but also because it challenged the very idea of what a revolution was or should be by seeming to suggest the possibility of a people without history writing their history. The mass mobilizations that broke the back of the Pahlavi dictatorship did so in language that could not be seen simply as imported Western discourse. Unlike the revolutions in France, Russia and even China, which, it could be argued, would be impossible to imagine without the Enlightenment, the revolution in Iran seemed to distance itself from the Enlightenment-derived slogans of liberty,

fraternity and equality or bread and land. It also broke from what were considered to be the conditions of possibility of a revolution: revolutions were supposed to happen in countries wherein the bulk of the population was rural, in countries that were facing persistent and systemic fiscal crises, and in which military and various coercive institutions had been weakened or demoralized by defeat.³ In contrast, in the years leading up to the Revolution, the Shah of Iran was awash with petro-dollars arising from the quadrupling of oil prices in 1973. In 1971, he had presided over lavish celebrations to mark the 2,500-year anniversary of the founding of the Persian Empire. The Pahlavi regime had been promised the most up-to-date weapons from the United States, and its coercive machinery was both intact and well-resourced. Furthermore, a majority of Iran's population lived in cities. In the years immediately before the Revolution, Iran was not confronted with a fiscal crisis, military defeat or state failure. It appeared to be a stable, prosperous society led by an enlightened pro-Western monarch.

The Islamic Revolution in Iran dislocated the hegemony of the Kemalist discourse in Muslimistan, dislocated the hegemony of pro-American order in the region and dislocated the epistemological hegemony that determined revolutions as the product of Enlightenment-derived thinking. One of the best illustrations of this was provided by Fred Halliday, whose book on the eve of the revolution in Iran predicted a number of outcomes for Iran including military rule, continued monarchy, even a socialist republic, but failed to mention the possibility of an Islamic government.⁴ This was not due to Halliday's inability to understand that Islam could not be just slotted in a Western history-shaped hole, but also because the very idea that transformations could occur outside the West without the use of Western imports was simply considered to be impossible.

The concept of revolution has generated a very dense and detailed literature ranging from Marxist paradigms to various structural-demographic accounts. The key to all these descriptions is the idea that revolutions denote a ruptural transformation. Revolutions tend to be seen as a feature of modernity: that is, revolutions are only possible when it is possible to conceive of the world as being open to human interventions rather than as something that is given by tradition, divine force(s) or nature. Revolutions are purposeful attempts to reorder the world rather than restore a corrupted order. Revolutions are expressions of agency. A revolutionary situation is political because it is a moment in which the difference between friends and enemies is often at its sharpest. It occurs when previous conventions for domesticating differences are no longer working effectively, and it seeks to establish a new society. The destruction of the old order and the reconstruction of a new order in Iran were carried out under the sign of Islam.

Islam was disclosed in the revolutionary upheavals that overthrew the Pahlavi regime in four main ways. First, the process of mobilizations, disruptions and demonstrations that made up much of the actual stuff of what is described as the Revolution used rituals and practices that are identified as Islamic; for example, the forty-day mourning cycle. That is, demonstrations would occur to commemorate those who had been killed by security forces, and then forty days later there would be demonstrations for those who died in the funeral processions. This allowed the anti-Pahlavi to recuperate, organize and continue to chip away at the authority of the regime.

Secondly, the Revolution was represented through the centrality of Khomeini and his followers. This was not the only way in which the austere and indomitable figure of Khomeini became the surface of inscription upon which the heterogeneous demands of those who were antagonistic to the Pahlavi regime were written. Khomeini's various pronouncements during the eighteen-month period leading to the removal of the Shah were all couched in a vocabulary that drew on Islam for its inspiration. Khomeini was successful in turning the question of the legitimacy of the Pahlavi regime

into a question of its conformity to Islamic norms of legitimate authority. Francois Furet, in his analysis of the French Revolution, explains how the vacancy of traditional sites of power provided a space from which a revolutionary discourse could be articulated. He adds that, in the absence of a political center, “Politics was a matter of establishing just who represented the people, or equality or the nation: victory was in the hands of those who were capable of occupying and keeping that symbolic position.”⁵ In the Iranian Revolution, too, the question of representation was critical; it was, in fact, doubly decisive. This was so because in Iran the process of the Revolution was not confined to occupying an empty center, but also involved displacing an entrenched occupant and then replacing it with a new system of power. Given that Khomeini was regarded as one of the six most senior Islamic scholars in Iran,⁶ and the widespread popular belief in his personal piety, his prominence helped define the revolution as Islamic.⁷

Thirdly, given the close relationship between the Pahlavi regime and the United States dating from the latter’s entry into the region, it was likely that the United States would be concerned about instability arising from the weakening of a regime that it supported. This meant that the conflict between the regime and revolution began to be overdetermined by the antagonism between the West and Islam. Given the history of Anglo-American interference in Iran’s domestic affairs (e.g., the CIA’s organization of the coup to remove Mossadegh in August 1953) and the very visible way in which Washington had identified its interests with those of the Pahlavi regime, the anti-Shah forces were highly suspicious of U.S. actions. This suspicion and hostility reached its climax with the capture of the U.S. embassy in 1979. The ensuing “hostage crisis” did a lot to project the humiliation and decline of American power.⁸ (It has to be remembered that only four years earlier the United States had been very publically forced to flee its embassy in Saigon – signaling its defeat in the Vietnam War.) The combination of the anti-American and pro-Islamic strands in the Iranian Revolution helped produce the image of “Islamic fundamentalism” as an irrational primeval force bent on the destruction of modernity and progress.

Fourthly, the consolidation of the Revolution in the Islamic Republic of Iran included in its initial phases a cultural transformation that sought to “de-Westoxicate” Iranian society. This cultural transformation had a great effect because Iran, which had long been championed as an alternative to leftist national liberation struggles and an example of the possibility of modernization from above (with the assistance of the United States), was very deliberately rejecting that capitalist pro-Western modernization model. It was rejecting this model precisely in terms of an anti-Western radicalism that was supposed to have been averted by the application of the very same model.

All these features helped disclose Islam in the Revolution of Iran. This Islam however was not some essence that was a constant in Iranian society and culture. There is no Islamic essence in Iran (or for that matter anywhere else including the Hejaz), and as such it had to be articulated not uncovered. For more than fifty years, Islam was virtually absent from the public affairs of Muslimistan and of the Muslim *ummah* (Muslim community or nation) in general. Thus, the disclosure of Islam in the upheavals that characterized the revolution in Iran signaled the return of the repressed.

The Kemalist Order

In 1922, Mustafa Kemal and his colleagues finally consolidated their hold over Turkish-speaking areas of what had been multi-ethnic, multilingual and multifaith Ottoman domains, and began to introduce a series of reforms, beginning with the ending of the sultanate (November 1, 1922), the proclamation of the Turkish Republic (October 29, 1923), the outlawing of the *fez* (November 25,

1925) and the declaration of the state as secular (April 10, 1928).⁹ These reforms can be symbolized by the de facto abolition of the caliphate.¹⁰ The caliphate was a metaphor not only for Muslim unity but Muslim continuity. There was a sense that, following the death of the Prophet, the Muslim *ummah* had always had a caliph (alas, sometimes more than one). Debates among Muslims about statecraft tended to focus on the qualities needed to ensure good caliphs rather than sustained arguments against the institution of the caliphate. There is much debate in contemporary Turkish historiography about the degree to which the reforms instituted by Mustafa Kemal were ruptural. It can be shown that in many ways the actions of the Kemalists built upon a series of accommodations that their Ottoman predecessors had adopted as a way of trying to cope with the emergence of Western global hegemony. It is, however, difficult to imagine that any Ottoman leadership would have gone so far as to abolish the caliphate if only for the reason that the caliphate continued to confer a degree of legitimacy and prestige to the Ottoman state. By abolishing the caliphate the Kemalists signaled their intent to base their authority on a legitimacy that was not derived from an Islamic history. In other words, the Kemalists took seriously the claims that Western superiority is the necessary product of European cultural practices rather than the outcome of Eurocentric historiographical conventions. The evacuation of Islamic history as the source of legitimacy, as the language to dwell in or the horizon for society meant that the Kemalists had to construct a new political subject. In other words, being Muslim could only mean a traditional attachment to a way of life; it did not mean being part of an ongoing stream of history. The Kemalists saw subjectivity as being expressed in the form of nationality. Thus, it was important for them to reconstruct their societies along the lines of one nation, language and land. It is also important to recall that, although Kemalism was pioneered in former Ottoman heartlands, it came to hegemonize all of Muslimistan.

Thus, in the wake of formal decolonization, large parts of Muslimistan were taken over by elites who were either directly inspired by Mustafa Kemal or the repertoire of governance engineered by the Kemalists. There was also a sense in which there was a great deal of overlap between the colonial state and the Kemalist state. For example, both were based on Orientalism,¹¹ which meant that bureaucracies and administrative cadres that had been trained and socialized in a world forged by European colonialism found it relatively straightforward to incorporate a Kemalist repertoire to address the banality of governance. It has been suggested that Kemalism was a form of auto-colonialism.¹² Kemalism shared a series of overlapping non-corresponding features; its coherence came not from the appearance of one kernel that could be found in all its instances but from the way in which it was constructed as distinct.

The Adventure of Pakistan

The hegemony of Kemalism was interrupted for a brief period between 1947 and 1951 by the experiment of Pakistan. The movement for Pakistan itself presented a challenge to Kemalism. There were three possible subject positions around which an emancipatory or decolonial project could be built in the context of British-ruled South Asia. There was the possibility of a pan-Indian identity; that is, to take colonial difference as the primary form of identification and mobilization. A pan-Indian subject would be organized not around an ethnicity, linguistic community or religious congregation, but rather the exclusion of British (European/Western) rule. In other words, it would be an identity based on not being British/European. There was the possibility of a multinational South Asia. That is, South Asia would be a mere geographic expression containing a variety of potential nation-states. Regions such as Gujarat, Punjab and Bengal would form individual nations based around a distinct literature and language, shared territory and common cultural practices.¹³

In contrast to a pan-Indian or multinational South Asia, the third option was to craft a trans-regional, multilingual and trans-ethnic subject position based around not only an exclusion between Indian and European but rather between Muslim and Hindu. To an extent, this cleavage represented a largely precolonial articulation in which a Muslim center exerted varying degrees of control over the largely Hindu periphery. However, this contrast between the two positions was not a reflection of bounded groups, but rather a repertoire of cultural and historical signifiers that can be organized in terms of the Islamicate and Indic.¹⁴ The articulation of Muslim/Hindu in the postcolonial context (the working out of the succession to the British Raj) transformed these subject positions, making them signifiers of devotional practices and rituals rather than of rulers and ruled. The exclusionary nature of the relationship between rulers and ruled in the Islamicate South Asian environment did not (could not) imply the sort of exclusion involved in the elaboration of Hindu and Muslim identities forged in crucible of an Anglo-centric South Asia. This formulation of Hindu and Muslim was an attempt to recover the widest possible precolonial subject position, thus both confirming Indology and rejecting it. The quest for a Muslim nation in South Asia was confronted with the idea that South Asia was in essence Hindu; hence, there was the necessity for a Muslim nation to restrain the essence of South Asia. The two-nation theory constructed an Islamicate historical presence not as something belonging to the past but rather as something that could be projected into the future. The demand for a Muslim homeland was also a retort to the Kemalist conviction that the Muslim could not be a political subject. The massive mobilizations around the slogan “Islam is in danger” and the political nature of the demand for Pakistan (in that those who championed it were not necessarily going to be its beneficiaries) have become lost in the dominant histories of the partition.

The Pakistan experiment offered the chance of a mobilized Muslim subjectivity to construct a virtually ex nihilo order.¹⁵ there was no prior Muslim state for Pakistan to restore, nor was there any possibility of constructing a pre-Islamic heritage for Pakistan given the very distinct histories of its two wings. Unlike, say, Iran or Turkey, the founders of Pakistan were confronted by a constitutional void caused by the demise of the Mughal Empire in 1857.¹⁶ The Pakistani constitution could not simply transfer the monarchical prerogative to the people, so the history of the Pakistani Constitution was fairly protracted and contested. In this context, Mawdudi’s elaboration of Pakistan as an “ideological state” makes sense: because Pakistan had no precedents in previous Islamicate states, Mawdudi’s understanding of ideological state was to establish the legitimacy of Pakistan in terms of its becoming rather than the uncovering of an already existing being. Pakistan emerged out of nothing, as a promise that had yet to be redeemed. On August 14, 1947, Pakistan gained its independence – the most populous Muslim state in the world, containing nearly a quarter of the planet’s Muslims. The demographic weight of Pakistan, its relatively complex ensemble of socioeconomic institutions and the role of Islam in the demands for its formation meant that the creation of Pakistan had an impact throughout the Muslim *ummah*. It demonstrated that a Muslim subject position was compatible with contemporary state form. The ending of direct formal colonial rule over such a large section of the Muslim *ummah* helped open a decolonial horizon for other Muslims still under colonial rule.

Pakistan was a major disruption of the Kemalist hegemony: the idea of Pakistan was based on the mobilization of subjects based not on ethnicity or language, but rather on being Muslim. This politicizing Muslim identity was precisely the discourse that Kemalism rejected. The politicization of a Muslim identity was the very condition of possibility for Pakistan. The demand that Muslims of the British Raj had to have a distinct homeland meant that being Muslim could not simply be dismissed as something that could be confined to the private sphere. The mass mobilizations that sustained the demands for a Muslim homeland were only possible with the appearance of Muslim mobilization and

the articulation of an Islamic ideological state. The idea that Islam constitutes an ideology – in other words, that Islam was not just a religion that had to be confined to matters of private devotion but rather a system of belief with socioeconomic impact – was a direct challenge to the way in which Kemalism attempted to inscribe Islam as belonging to the private realm or the past.

This rejection of Kemalism, however, was not sustained when it came to the working of the Pakistani state. The vision of Pakistan as an Islamic state began to be recuperated into the repertoire of Kemalist statecraft. This can be seen around the debates about the official language of Pakistan. There were a number of possibilities; from a recognition of the multilingual character of the country and the abandonment of any attempt to have an official language to the choice of an official language that replaced all current linguistic hierarchies (for example, Arabic in the context of Islamicate South Asia). Instead, the choice was narrowed down to Urdu and English with unfortunate consequences for other languages, in particular Bengali. Pakistan increasingly took the form of a conventional state whose guiding principles were based on the continuity of colonial and Kemalist rule. Once the mobilization in the name of Islam had created Pakistan, the leadership of the new country, for the most part unaware of the radical nature of its formation, began to banalize its claims, and the depoliticization of Islam began. Unlike other Kemalist entities, Pakistani's Kemalist tendencies continued to be run up against the founding narrative of Pakistan as a Muslim homeland. The tragedy of Pakistan remains that those who rule it do not believe in it and those who believe in it have so far not been able to rule it. By 1951, with the passage of a citizenship law that closed migration to Pakistan even for other South Asian Muslims, the Muslim homeland was clearly on its way to being another Kemalist republic. The recuperation of Pakistan into Kemalism meant that the exercise of Muslim agency that brought forth the largest Muslim state in the world was depoliticized and neutralized, and the decolonial potential of the experiment remained unfulfilled.

I have sketched out the ebbs and flows of the idea of a Muslim political agency around three main points: the emergence of Kemalism as an *Ummatic* hegemony represented by the abolition of the caliphate; the challenge and restoration of Kemalism in the mobilization and formation of Pakistan and the construction of counter-hegemony to the Kemalist order signaled by the Islamic revolution in Iran. In the next section of the chapter I want to look at the epistemic delinking that made Khomeini's deconstruction of Kemalism possible, and which underlines his historical significance beyond the actualities of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

The Caliphate of Ayatollah Khomeini

The significance of Khomeini stems from the way in which he came to represent the possibility of an Islam projected into the future. By this, I do not discount his achievements in challenging the Pahlavi regime, or providing a focus and overall coordination of the energies that made up the revolution of Iran, or his skill in statecraft in facilitating the consolidation of the Islamic Republic despite international and domestic hostilities. Nor do I wish to discount his role as a scholar of *fiqh*. It is the case that Khomeini was a rare combination of intellectual, revolutionary leader and the ruler of a country, but I would like to suggest that all of these activities and skills were important beyond their specific fields as part of the narrative that I have sketched out about Muslim autonomy. In this narrative, the emergence of a political Muslim identity is antagonistic to a Kemalist subjectivity.¹⁷

One way of understanding Kemalism is to see it as the expression of the political form of modernity in an Islamicate context. Thus, Kemalism is not simply an ideology of rule; it is an integration of cultural and socioeconomic elements. In other words, it is what could be described as a

Gramscian historical bloc.¹⁸ As such, its condition of possibility is the world system of modernity/coloniality.¹⁹ This world system is not only a socioeconomic structure, but also a cultural and epistemic construct. As a consequence, the processes of overturning Kemalism must be multidimensional, and cannot be confined to one or two fields of human activity. When the Shah of Iran was toppled from the Peacock Throne, it was not a revolt or popular insurrection but a revolution precisely because it brought down Kemalism as the only source of governance in the post-caliphate universe.

The Revolution was the surface upon which heterogeneous demands were inscribed; unifying these demands was the antagonism to the Pahlavi regime, an antagonism represented by the austere figure of Khomeini and his implacable insistence upon removing the Pahlavis from power. Khomeini, however, was not simply the symbol of the revolution, for he was also the most powerful advocate of a vision of an Islamicate polity that refused the role that Kemalism had consigned to Islam. Khomeini's sign is precisely the way that he symbolizes the zombification of Kemalism. That is, he symbolizes the possibility that Mustafa Kemal represented an attempt to reconfigure what had been an Islamicate society as Western, at least culturally if not always in terms of its foreign policy alignments. The zombification of Kemalism refers to the way in which Kemalism continues; it no longer has an inner life.²⁰ That is, it is not able to project itself into the future. This explains why Kemalism is not able to offer plausible solutions to the problems that confront the Muslim *ummah*. Westernization as a strategy of overcoming the cruelties and injustices that ordinary people in Muslimistan face increasingly lacks credibility, and its support is confined to small sections of society who imagine themselves to be liberal and forward-looking. Kemalism has not disappeared; it has not been buried, but it is no longer alive; it is not a creative imaginative force.

Khomeini came to represent a critique of Kemalism. This critique was not, however, a point-by-point rebuttal of the key assumptions of Kemalism. Rather, he sketched out a future very different from the one that Kemalism offered. Khomeini's rejection of Kemalism was firstly based on the articulation of a Muslim subjectivity as a meaningful political agent. This had a number of aspects, including a radical overturning of Shi'i orthodoxy on the question of legitimate government for Muslims. Khomeini argued that in the absence of the Mahdi it was incumbent upon every Muslim to strive to live under an Islamic government. The Orthodox Shi'i position had been that all government was illegitimate in the absence of the Twelfth Imam; however, any government was better than no government.

Such a view encouraged political quietism and a sense of the tragic in politics among the followers of the Jaafari *mazhab*. It was also the main difference between other schools of Islamic jurisprudence which argued that the legitimate ruler of the Muslim community was chosen by representatives of the community. Khomeini's theory of Islamic government for all intents and purposes closed the differences between the Shi'i and Sunni position on legitimate government. Thus, we can see in Khomeini the articulation of a post-*mazhabi* Muslim subject position, often hesitant and sometimes inconsistent.²¹ There is no doubt that Khomeini considered himself a follower of the Jaafari *mazhab* – and his training was within its curriculum. It is, however, possible to read in some of his actions and statements a clear recognition that *Ummatic* solidarity trumped sectarian differences.

This view was strengthened when Khomeini tried to minimize the role of the Jaafari *mazhab* in the Iranian Constitution. The success of Khomeini in transcending the Sunni-Shi'i divide can be seen by the way in which his *fatwa* on February 14, 1989, against the publication of *The Satanic Verses* galvanized support among Muslims from South Asia, despite the fact that most of these Muslims were not Shi'i. The power of the *fatwa* was also an indication not merely of Khomeini's institutional

position within the Islamic Republic of Iran, but also his symbolic authority throughout the Muslim *umma*.

Khomeini's intervention crystallized the production of a Muslim subject position in Britain.²² Prior to the protests against the publication of *The Satanic Verses*, there had been mosques, halal butcher shops, people who went to Friday prayers and kept fast during the month of Ramadan – and occasional local demands in which one could see the glimmering of a Muslim subject position. These did not, however, translate into a national Muslim subject position that disrupted the ethnoscape of Britain. Muslim as a public identity carried by various ethnically marked populations did not exist in Britain. All these activities associated with Islam were subsumed into race-relations discourse as “Asian” or black. Khomeini's intervention consolidated a mobilization on the basis of being Muslim outside the framework of agitation that normally involved leftist organizations, trade unions and other ethnically marked populations. This irruption of Muslimness within Western plutocracies began to consolidate as a global phenomenon with Khomeini's ability to transcend both national and sectarian barriers in his articulation of Muslim political agency.

Political agency for Khomeini meant the capacity of Muslims to decolonize themselves and realign their societies within Islamic history. Decolonization was not simply the act of freeing Iran from indirect colonial rule, but also of dismantling the global colonial order. For Khomeini, the revolution in Iran had to be aligned with broader international anticolonial struggles. Hence, his condemnation of the Pahlavi regime and the general Kemalist order that gripped Muslimistan and connected moral opprobrium with a decolonizing critique. The attempt to transform political questions into moral categories is a very different exercise from projects that see the play of political structures in moral problems. The former tends to focus on evil; for the latter, the emphasis is on justice. Justice, however, does not have a permanent or precise content. The demand for justice is a call to rectify something by reference to what ought to be as opposed to what is. In the wake of Islamism, Kemalism has increasingly taken the form of Islamization. Islamization is dominated by an ontic understanding of Islam in which Islam is reduced to a finite set of properties. Khomeini offered the Muslim not a theo-politics but a political theology of liberation. His reading of Islamic texts was harnessed to the understanding that individual moral lapses were not usefully understood through the biography of evil, but rather they were caused by structural factors. Their resolution had to be political, not theological.

Conclusion

Great revolutions are not merely domestic events in which one ruling order is replaced by another; they have implications for the legitimacy of the international system. The fall of the Peacock Throne was not just the end of an absolutist monarchy; it also signaled the failure of a view of the world in which universality was contained within a Western frame. The significance of Khomeini was not just in shepherding the anti-Pahlavi forces, but also in the stewardship of the new configuration of state and society that emerged from the Iranian Revolution.

Just before Khomeini passed away, in a series of letters to President Khamenei he declared that the Islamic Republic of Iran could abrogate any aspect of Islam to ensure its survival. Critics saw this declaration as the retreat of Islamism into *raison d'état* or secularism. By placing Khomeini's statement in the schema dominated by the distinction between secularism and religion, what is missed is the way in which Islam came to be disclosed in Khomeini's interventions (intellectual and governmental). For despite declaring the possibility of the abrogation of Islam, Khomeini refused to

allow the use of chemical weapons by Iranian forces in retaliation for their use by Saddam Hussein's army, with considerable consequences for Iran's war effort. Khomeini's understanding of Islam was primarily in ontological rather than ontic terms. Islam could not be exhausted by its various manifestations; it was not just a religion among others. For Khomeini, the ontological nature of Islam allowed it to go beyond its historical and contextual determinations.

Of course, there is an agreement between Muslims that Islam is formed by a belief in monotheism, by acceptance of the Prophethood of Muhammad,²³ the divine nature of the Qur'an, by "five pillars" of observance and so on. This way of understanding Islam does not take into account the background assumptions that allow it to be disclosed as such. For example, the idea that Islam is religion and religion is what the Enlightenment thought Western Christianity was. These background assumptions are not forever fixed or random; rather, they are the consequences of historical shifts in understanding.²⁴ By refusing to understand Islam in its current hegemonic ontic manifestations, Khomeini came to represent the primacy of Muslim agency. This representation made it possible to see in Khomeini's leadership a de facto decolonial caliphate.²⁵ That is, Khomeini was able to resuture Muslim subjectivity to an Islamicate history as an alternative to the Western supremacist Plato-to-NATO historical sequence. At the same time, the complicated and often difficult articulation of Muslim subjectivity allowed Khomeini to represent a post-*mazhabi* sense of *Ummatic* solidarity. The possibility of a decolonial caliphate able to defend the Muslim *ummah* from the "Great Satan" and its clients could be gleaned in many of Khomeini's interventions. The caliph as a symbol of Islamicate continuity and Muslim solidarity, abolished by Kemalists, was virtually reborn (though unnamed) in Khomeini's leadership of the Islamic Revolution and his rule as *Velayet-e faqih*.

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¹ Ruhollah Khomeini, "The First Day of God's Government" in Hamid Algar (ed., tr.), *Islam and Revolution: Writings and Declarations of Imam Khomeini* (London: Mizan Press, 1981), p. 265.

² This tripartite account of the political is based on the work of Carl Schmitt. See, in particular, Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political* (trans. George Schwab), (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1976).

³ This list of features is based on Theda Skocpol's work, and in particular her attempt to fit the Iranian Revolution into her schema of great revolutions. See Theda Skocpol, "Rentier State and Shi'a

Islam in the Iranian Revolution,” *Theory and Society*, vol. 11, no. 3 (1982), pp. 265–283.

[4](#) Fred Halliday, *Iran: Dictatorship and Development* (New York: Penguin Books, 1979).

[5](#) Francois Furet, *Interpreting the French Revolution* (trans. Elborg Folster), (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 48.

[6](#) Attempts to explain the influence of the *Ulema* have tended to emphasize their leadership of traditional sectors of Iranian society, or that they provided an independent organizational matrix through which political demands could be effectively articulated. See Mansoor Moaddel, *Class, Politics, and Ideology in the Iranian Revolution* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993). See also, Skocpol, “Rentier State and Shi’a Islam.”

[7](#) See, for example, Asef Bayat, *Workers and Revolution in Iran* (London: Zed Books, 1987).

[8](#) Said investigates some of these themes of U.S. hostility towards Iran as a source of humiliation in Edward Said, *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World* (Vintage Books, 1981), pp. 74–125. For a detailed analysis of U.S.–Iran relations, see William O. Beeman, *The “Great Satan” vs. the “Mad Mullahs”* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2005).

[9](#) The reforms continued apace well into the 1930s. In 1933, the call to prayers was required to be in Turkish rather than Arabic, as it had been since the beginning of Islam. In 1934, the Law of Surnames was adopted and government officials went around giving people European-style surnames. This had a threefold effect: it again ruptured the sense of historical continuity, as these names were chosen from an official list and had little relationship with the family genealogy of the people concerned; the names signaled the European character of the new Turkish subject and at the same time it helped enhance the caging capacity of the modernizing state. In 1935, Friday was replaced by Sunday as the legal weekly holiday – again, to bring it in line with European (but, of course, Christian) practice and diminish the significance of Friday and congregational prayers.

[10](#) In actuality, the office of the caliphate was transferred to the Grand National Assembly.

[11](#) See Mahmut Mutman, “Under the Sign of Orientalism: The West vs. Islam,” *Cultural Critique*, vol. 23 (1992–1993), 165–197; Salman Sayyid, *A Fundamental Fear: Eurocentrism and the Emergence of Islamism* (London: Zed Books, 2003).

[12](#) See Yasin Aktay, “Body, Text, Identity: The Islamist Discourse of Authenticity in Modern Turkey,” PhD thesis, Middle Eastern Technical University (1997).

[13](#) See Shveta Vyas-Pare, “Becoming India: Contingent Regional and National Identities,” PhD thesis, University of South Australia (forthcoming).

[14](#) See David Gilmartin and Bruce B. Lawrence (eds.), *Beyond Turk and Hindu: Rethinking Religious Identities in Islamicate South Asia* (Gainesville, FL: University of Florida Press, 2000), pp. 1–4, 18–20.

[15](#) Of course, a literal ex nihilo beginning is an impossibility this side of the big bang.

[16](#) See the discussion by Said Amir Arjomand in his “Islamic Constitutionalism,” *Annual Review of Law and Social Science*, vol. 3 (2007), pp. 115–140.

[17](#) It is not that difficult to argue that there is overlap between aspects of Kemalism and Islamism. However, these overlaps are not sufficient to dissolve the difference between these two distinct projects. What is distinct about Kemalism and Islamism is not that each project must denote a completely separate content, but rather that all the contents of these positions are given their coherence by the articulation of antagonistic difference from each other. An Islamist state will not abolish the infrastructures of the Kemalist state, no more than the October Revolution led to the wholesale dismantling of the institutional ensemble of the Czarist state. Contrast this with Chris Houston’s attempt to argue for the similarities between Kemalism and Islamism: Chris Houston,

Kurdistan: Crafting of National Selves (Oxford: Berg, 2008).

[18](#) Gramsci's take on the historical bloc was as a complex of base and superstructural elements brought and held together by fundamental classes. See Antonio Gramsci in Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (eds., trans.), *Selections from Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971), p. 366. An anti-foundationalist interpretation would see the historic bloc as an ensemble of social elements held together by political articulatory practices. See Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards A Radical Democratic Politics* (trans. Winston Moore and Paul Cammack), (London: Verso, 1985), p. 138.

[19](#) Ramon Grosfoguel, "World-System Analysis in the Context of Transmodernity, Border Thinking and Global Coloniality," *Review*, vol. 29, no. 2 (2006), 167–187.

[20](#) See Daniel W. Drezner, *Theories of International Politics and Zombies* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).

[21](#) See Amr Sabet's development of a post-*mazhabi* orientation in development of critical analytics of political projects of Muslim autonomy. Amr G.E. Sabet, *Islam and the Political: Theory, Governance and International Relations* (London: Pluto Press, 2008), pp. 22–27.

[22](#) Shehla Khan, "Muslims!" in N. Ali, V.S. Kalra and Siddiq Sayyid (eds.), *A Postcolonial People: South Asians in Britain* (London: Hurst, 2006), pp. 182–187.

[23](#) Peace be upon him.

[24](#) See Iain Thomson's reading of Heidegger: Iain D. Thomson, *Heidegger on Ontotheology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

[25](#) It is often asserted that Shi'is reject the caliphate. Such a view seems to confuse the Shi'i criticism of specific caliphs with the institution itself. For example, it is unlikely that most Shi'i would reject the caliphate of Ali. A post-*mazhabi* reading would see Khomeini beyond Shi'i-Sunni framing. See Sabet, *Islam and the Political*, pp. 97–124.

13 Contentious Legacies of the Ayatollah

Babak Rahimi

“The political system established by Khomeini,” the late Fred Halliday once remarked, “has endured, combining, in a way that no other modern revolution has been able to do, elements of unelected revolutionary power and a democratically elected leadership.”¹ Halliday, a leading academic of revolutions and an astute student of Iranian politics, made this observation in response to the 1999 student uprising, the most violent political protests in post-revolutionary period in Iran to that day.² Ten years later, Iran was to witness another historic popular uprising, even larger than the 1999 protests, in weeks following the presidential elections of June 2009, whose results in favor of the incumbent president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, provoked massive protests in major cities around the country. At the threshold of another tightly controlled election, the Islamic Republic had experienced its most serious crisis of political legitimacy to date, and yet it had survived.

Sadly, Halliday died in 2010. But if he were able to witness the course of Iranian politics in the post-election period, he would not have been too surprised to learn about the tension that unfolded between Ahmadinejad, now despised by many conservatives for his defiance of the elite establishment, and the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, nearly two years after the 2009 elections.³ He would have, I imagine, described such conflict as a major ideological struggle over who can best rule over the Islamic government, and an ideological tension reflecting a deeper contradiction within the political structure of the Islamic Republic; a conflict between the *vali-ye faqih* (Guardian Jurist) as an unelected office and the executive branch as an elected institution.⁴

Elite factionalism has played an integral role in such institutional conflict. In 2005, after Ahmadinejad unexpectedly won the elections, Halliday would explain the meteoric rise of the new president as a manifestation of “popular resentment at the Islamist elite – the post-revolutionary ruling group of around 5,000 men, cleric and lay alike, a kind of Islamic *nomenklatura*.”⁵ At the heart of the new hardliner movement, known as the Abadgaran (“developers”) faction, lay a “populist mood” to challenge remnants of the old guard and embrace social justice in an attempt to recreate the original revolutionary spirit that was bravely displayed in the redistribution of wealth projects in the beginning of the revolution and, more importantly, at the battlefields of the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988).⁶ Such factional strife was a “revolutionary spasm,” Halliday argued; a tremor for righteousness, a call for purity of the revolutionary soul of the Islamic Republic.

For the new conservatives, Ayatollah Khomeini embodied the utopian-populist spirit of the Islamic revolution and they, as the true heirs of the late Ayatollah, are responsible for sifting through his legacy and reaffirming the Islamic Republic as it was meant to be, not the way it has been deviated by the old-guard reformist or pragmatist (conservative) elites. Although the reform period (1997–2005) brought to the fore various debates over government, economic and foreign policy, some of which, drawing upon the participatory aspects of Khomeini’s conception of governance – the post-reform period – however, witnessed the reinvention of Khomeini’s populist spirit that identified him as the leader of the 1979 Revolution.

In many ways, as famously argued by Ervand Abrahamian, populism was central to Khomeini’s

project of establishing an Islamic state.⁷ Although Khomeini was an advocate of a pristine Islam, with the Shi'i clerics assuming ultimate authority in an Islamic state, he also advocated a vision of political community that blended notions of popular sovereignty in terms of participatory politics with Third World populism. Khomeini's Islamic Republic is a construct of multiple and at times inconsistent visions of political modernity. As Daniel Brumberg has argued, such a set of paradoxical imaginaries of governance and politics has enabled many of his followers to reinterpret Khomeini's political legacy in diverse ways, with conservatives or hardliners focusing mostly on his authoritarian discourses, and reformists emphasizing more his popular democratic conceptions of politics. But each has cast themselves as the rightful custodians of his legacy.⁸ Grappling with the perpetual reinvention of Khomeini's multi-vision of the Islamic Republic has shaped Iranian politics to this day.

The principle purpose of this chapter is to discuss Khomeini's legacy. The term "legacy" used here, however, has little to do with merely underscoring the impact that the late Ayatollah has had on Iranian political history. But, going back to Halliday and also Brumberg, the term implies the ways in which conflicting discourses and practices made by Khomeini, largely as a result of his unique ability to fuse different religious doctrines and political ideologies, and his pragmatism in institutionalizing such ideas, have shaped different political and social imaginaries for his followers in Iran. What is of greater importance about Khomeini's legacy is the manner with which his diverse supporters have drawn from different images of his personality and ideas in constructing multiple collective memories, many of which have shaped the formation of the Islamic Republic. Khomeini's legacy is therefore about the political realities he helped create, as well as the different ways that he is remembered as an historical figure. This chapter attempts to elucidate his complex legacy by tracing the course of his development from a rebellious cleric in Qom to a populist revolutionary in Paris and finally to the head of the state of the first theocratic state in modern times. The chapter will analyze his legacy to demonstrate that the legacy of Khomeini's political activism has largely centered around various attempts to invent an image of spiritual and temporal leadership based on his memory, and has been contested during the course of the turbulent history of the Islamic Republic.

The Political legacy

Like Vladimir Lenin and Mao Zedong, Khomeini was a revolutionary intellectual. He conceptualized, gave speeches and asked pertinent questions about where the Iranian revolution was headed. What sort of government should replace the monarchy? In terms of practical mobilization, what was the best strategy for political transformation to take place at a street level? However, unlike Lenin and Mao, he intellectualized his conception of revolution not from an ideological perspective – the sort that Marxists maintained based on the doctrine of proletarian revolution (or, in the case of Mao, peasant revolution) – but in the strategic appropriation of revolutionary action popular among Third World activists and anti-imperialist movements in the 1970s.⁹ Khomeini was intellectually more flexible in his reinterpretation of classical Shi'i traditions, and adapted his theology to emergent populist ideas when they accommodated his changing political world view as a thinker.

As a Shi'i jurist, Khomeini was not original by the standards of Shi'i scholarly traditions. In 1943, when his *Kashf-e Asrar (Unveiling of Secrets)* was published, he mostly focused on how governance was possible based upon Islamic values and supervision over secular authorities by the *ulema*. As Said Amir Arjomand has noted, *Kashf-e Asrar* revealed him as a "staunch traditionalist" in defending the Shi'i clerical establishment against secular intellectuals and reformist clerics who had become increasingly vocal in the Iranian public sphere under the reign of Reza Shah (1925–1941), whose

secular-nationalist modernization project had deprived the clerics of much institutional authority in Iranian society.¹⁰ By drawing upon traditions within Shi'ism when defending the right of clerical jurists to collaborate with the monarchy, regardless of whether it was tyrannical, he echoed the Shi'i notion of clerical involvement in government affairs within the confines of an advisory role. Until the return of the Twelfth Shi'i Imam, the responsibility of guiding the religious community was to be left to the *mujtahideen*; the task of governance would be left to nonreligious authorities who would maintain order, protect the weak and defend society from foreign influences.

Khomeini nevertheless raised two original arguments in his *Kashf-e Asrar*. First, Khomeini defended a strong *shariah*-based constitution, similar to Shaykh Fazlollah Nuri. Despite his suspicions of parliament, he viewed it as a place within which the *shariah* could be enforced with the consent of the people – mostly Muslim – who gave their total obedience to the divine law. Perhaps closer to Plato's later writings on the *Laws* than the *Republic*, the source of all authority for Khomeini lay in divine law that was best implemented in the legislative assembly. The role of government was to protect the population, and allow the clerics to supervise over the interpretation and execution of laws.

Second, as correctly observed by Vanessa Martin, Khomeini also advocated a strong centralized state, and this was most likely influenced by Reza Shah.¹¹ There is a strong modernist element in Khomeini's *Kashf-e Asrar*, which recognizes the legitimacy of law passed by parliament and the necessity of having a centralized government. Despite his attempt to defend Shi'i tradition, Khomeini was actually making important theoretical contributions to classical political jurisprudence.

The evolution in Khomeini's theoretical approach toward politics underwent a major change following his exile from Iran, primarily as a consequence of his political activities against Mohammad Reza Shah's reform programs and amicable relations with the United States in the early 1960s. In his short period of stay in Bursa, Turkey, Khomeini began to shift away from his "traditionalist" stance. In *Tahrir al-Wasilah (A Clarification of Questions)*, his second-most important political work, Khomeini would sharpen his conception of Islamic government by arguing for greater authority of the clerics as public figures; responsibility for fixing prices and interfering in the management of certain economic activities when beneficial to the community. As suggested by Baqer Moin, it was also in secular Turkey where Khomeini, in advance of his clerical colleagues, began to "pronounce on issues as diverse as artificial insemination, sex changes and praying in aeroplanes."¹² As a *marja-e taqlid* ("source of emulation"), Khomeini was now viewed as a socially liberal cleric by the standards of the conservative clerical establishment.

Although such elasticity of reasoning is due to the *usuli* emphasis on *ijtihad*, which flexibly applies rational reasoning to accommodate divine law in accordance with changing circumstances, Khomeini's time in Turkey reflects the innovative way that he addressed key political and social issues beyond the consensus found in the seminaries. Perhaps this change occurred due to the fact that Khomeini was now engaging with these issues outside of the confines of the *hawza*. There is, moreover, something creative about exile. According to Edward Said, distance, nonalignment and nonconnection serve as contrapuntal mediation for a person in exile to form a displaced identity in the liminal space.¹³ In many ways, this in-between locality in exile created the sort of intellectual ambience for Khomeini to compose his radical ideas during this critical period. Perhaps similar to Lenin's 1907–1917 exile in Western Europe, where he published *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*, Najaf also served Khomeini as a place of reflection; a place where he kept his distance from clerical orthodoxy, as he was deemed too radical by many leading clerics (some of whom were pro-Shah), and enjoyed relative freedom from Pahlavi's surveillance. In Najaf, Khomeini was an outsider in a

city with a long tradition of quietism.

As shown by Elvire Corboz, Najaf provided Khomeini with a crosscurrent network of growing supporters, known as the *nehzat*, who associated, communicated and politically collaborated under Khomeini's leadership across Iraq's border into Lebanon, Syria and, most importantly, Iran.¹⁴ It was through this network that Khomeini was able to design his famous doctrine of *velayat-e faqih*, or the Guardianship of the Jurist. In 1969–1970, he gave the most important series of lectures on the Islamic state, namely, *Hokumat-e Islami: Velayat-e Faqih* (Islamic Government: Guardianship of the Jurist), which argued that the supreme authority in the state, based on percepts of Islamic principles, should rest with the clerics. Until the return of the Mahdi, whose reappearance at the end of time would establish a truly just government, the clerics bore the responsibility of having to defend Islamic values, prevent corruption and resist foreign domination by primarily taking over the affairs of the state. This was a major innovation. Khomeini was challenging not only the Iranian monarchy, but also hundreds of years of traditional Twelver Shi'i jurisprudence on *imamate*, which primarily viewed the authority of clerics during the absence of Mahdi in limited terms of the custodianship over the seminary students, needy, orphans, widows and the insane.

It should be noted that, unlike his other writings, here Khomeini designed and disseminated his theoretical views during this period not primarily through the publication of books, which would have been written in a scholarly writing style inaccessible to the majority of Iranians, but through easily understandable speeches that were recorded on cassette tapes and later transcribed, copied and distributed through his network to Iran and other countries as pamphlets. The use of “small media” was hence intended to make his ideas immediately available and more accessible to a wider audience. What was ultimately revolutionary at this stage was the growing organizational clout of his *nehzat*, a vast network of students, admirers, and supporters whose leading figures such as Morteza Mutahhari, Ali Khamenei and Mohammad Beheshti were increasingly adopting Marxist strategies of activism and revolution, some of which were based on Leninist models of revolutionary organization. With the publication of numerous works on Islam, Marxism and various social issues, followers of Khomeini, mostly led by mid-ranking clerics, were in charge of translating and disseminating Khomeini's work and communicating a new Shi'i model of political activism for an expanding middle class in Iran.

It was precisely due to the influence of his network that Khomeini's political theology underwent a major transformation. As Abrahamian has shown, by adopting the populist discourses of class in binary terms of *mostazafin* (“oppressed”) and *mostakbarin* (“oppressors”), Khomeini at this stage of his intellectual career was creatively appropriating leftist discourses that were mostly popularized by Third World theorists such as Jalal Al-e Ahmad and Ali Shariati, of whose books – brought to him from Iran through his network – he read and admired.¹⁵ In Paris in 1978, when Khomeini was increasingly recognized as the leader of the revolution, he exhibited great flexibility as he selectively avoided discussing his theory of *velayat-e faqih* in order to appeal to a wider audience, especially the educated middle class and women activists.¹⁶ The 1970s therefore marked the emergence of a cosmopolitan Khomeini whose aura of inclusivity and authenticity, with reference to his religious pedigree and years of opposition in exile, became the face of the revolution.

Khomeini's originality therefore lay not as much in creating an entirely new political theology as in the way that he utilized variant discourses such as *velayat-e faqih* and populist visions of politics that buttressed a bottom-up structure of political order when prompted by changing circumstances. Of course, this also required transgressing many traditions largely set by the clerical establishment, one of which was to maintain a clear intellectual boundary between the emulator (*muqalid*) and the source

of emulation (*marja-e taqlid*), in which Khomeini's populist discourses defied. Students of his such as Mutahhari recognized the benefit of articulating an Islamic revolution in populist terms, and they continued to employ modernist concepts and associate with other Islamist and even secular groups for influence over the Iranian public sphere in the years before the Revolution. Khomeini's new generation of activist clerics were revolutionary not just for the sort of discourses they produced, but also for how they organized networks through cosmopolitan and transnational means of communication that significantly reconfigured the clerical institution.

The 1979 Revolution owes much to Khomeini's network. The network was partly responsible for bringing the mosque, *bazaar*, Marxists, leftist Islamists, liberal nationalists and other forces together to make a revolution that, in the words of Foucault, was characteristically "astonishingly ambiguous" in its range of unfolding trajectories.¹⁷ The network re-emerged during the 1979 institutionalization of *velayat-e faqih* and consolidation of a new Islamic polity. The establishment of the Islamic Republic marked the configuration of an eclectic project that in many ways reflected the political theology of Khomeini in the late 1970s. Part clerical and part based on the ideals of popular sovereignty, the new political order brought together competing forces that envisaged the new republic as both democratic and authoritarian in its theocratic form. Although the ultimate power was centralized in the office of the Supreme Leader, which Khomeini took over immediately after the approval of the constitution in October 24, 1979, the new political order also recognized a strong presidency and prime minister. The early institution building led by key Khomeinist figures such as Ayatollah Mohammad Beheshti at once secured the elitist politics of clerical guardian(s) and participatory politics of elections and representation.

Such "dissonant institutionalization," in the words of Brumberg, proved to be the most complex outcome of implementing Khomeini's Islamic ideology of *velayat-e faqih*. In the decades that followed the inception of the Islamic Republic, Iran continued to grapple with how to reconcile these contradictory elements, as Khomeinists from various factions have debated and reimaged their theocracy with competing references to Khomeini's multiple discourses and visions of governance. In the post-revolutionary period, state-building and by extension governance has primarily emanated from shifting social imaginaries that accommodate various visions of state power. Such imaginaries, as articulated by the constitution and administratively, legislatively and militarily carried out through various institutions and networks, have hardly ensured clear-cut policies on both the local and national levels. In many ways, post-revolutionary governance, as envisaged by Khomeini and interpreted by his followers in the decades after his death, has been built around an intricate management of factions and coalitions, together with strategies of influence, which reflect a broader struggle for determining the trajectory of the Islamic Republic. State building, in particular, has been motivated by enacting governing processes aimed at steering change and maintaining order through diverse measures of control by various branches of government as uneven centers of power.

Conflicting legacies and discourses about government and its ideological foundations in the early 1980s played an integral role in the Islamic Republic's struggle for definition, largely with clerical absolutism clashing with popular sovereignty over institution building and institutional changes. In the early revolutionary period, Khomeini himself came to represent a social imaginary with the manifestation of the cult of personality of the Imam as the leader of the Republic. From charismatic revolutionary figure to pragmatic statesman, from cleric to politician, from strategist to poet, Khomeini's appeal appeared in an image that accommodated contending ideals, in which his follower would interpret in various ways and, subsequently, compete with one another over his legacy after his death in 1989. It is in this complex political order of plural authorities and ideals – tied to distinct centers of power – that post-revolutionary governance developed into a multifaceted managerial

process with the potential for constant breakdowns and revitalization through conflict and compromise.

During the reformist period (1997–2005), for example, clashes between “conservative” and “reformist” factions revolved around claims to legitimate governance in reference to Khomeini’s policy decisions and especially speeches. Whereas conservatives relied heavily on his post-revolutionary clericalist discourse, reformists referred to his inclusive and democratic tropes before the Revolution. With the presidency of Ahmadinejad in 2005, Khomeini’s populism resurfaced in the new conservative camp, which reimagined the Islamic Republic in the nostalgia of the war years and in terms of the redemptive ethos of self-sacrifice for the nation and Islam. Concurrently, the entry of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) in the political sphere in the late reformist period (2003–2005) effectively transformed the Islamic Republic into a military-theocratic order in post-2009 election. This can be largely attributed to Khomeini’s militarism during the war years.¹⁸ IRGC and its vast economic and political network have reshaped the Islamic Republic in accordance to Khomeini’s conception of a strong state, which he originally advocated in his *Kashf-e Asrar* and later promoted during the war period. In contrary to this trend, Mir-Hussein Mousavi, a staunch Khomeinist and now a dissident politician under house arrest for challenging the 2009 election results, competed against Ahmadinejad in elections to combat populism and more importantly the incumbent president’s support for militarization of politics. Mousavi justified his opposition based on Khomeini’s wish in his last will and testament that the paramilitary force should stay out of politics in order to preserve the integrity of the Islamic Republic.¹⁹

The 1989 separation of *velayat* and *marja’iyat* was a watershed not only in Khomeini’s trajectory of political thought, but also in Shi’i Islam. Not only was Khomeini recreating the Islamic Republic by routinizing political authority, perhaps even secularizing it by differentiating the political from the spiritual spheres, but also inserting an invented political authority, legitimized by religion, to oversee the *marja’iyat* institution in its multiplicity of power centers mostly based in Najaf and Qom. Before his death, Khomeini came to regard the legitimacy of the Islamic Republic not simply as a theocracy, governed through divine guidance of the most learned jurist, but under the leadership of the most able jurist with at least a minimum of religious scholarly background who can determine the *maslahat* (public interest) of the nation. With this change, Khomeini had bequest his followers a political order essentially legitimized by expediency rather than idealism, which could only be attained with the return of the Mahdi. As Arjomand best describes, the change marked the emergence of a “theocratic monism” in that the *vali-e faqih* could legitimize “the entire apparatus of the state and all public law as Islamic and he can legislate on the basis of expediency and public interest.”²⁰ At this final stage, Khomeini’s Islamic Republic had become an Islamic leviathan.

Remembering the Imam

In his memory, Khomeinists have reinvented the Islamic Republic multiple times. This should not seem odd, as Khomeini also reinvented his image several times during his lifetime; subsequently leaving the legacy of a transcendent historical figure. Through his evolution from a cleric, mostly known inside the seminary circles in Qom in the 1930s to a national and transnational revolutionary figure based in northern Tehran in the 1980s, Khomeini was masterful in seizing on opportunities to have wider influence over public opinion and cultivate an image of himself with claims upon various audiences and for diverse purposes in shifting situations. Every speech, book statement or *fatwa* stems from an idealized personhood that he sought to embody through his everyday behaviors and

interactions with others. To the degree that self-presentation can highlight an ideology or an ideal in which it portrays, Khomeini – especially in his later years – managed to stage a highly disciplined personality to his followers and foes that both reflected populist and elitist features. In this sense, Khomeini, as earlier discussed, was a pragmatist and flexible in accommodating various performances for diverse audiences in accordance with shifting contexts.

But this flexibility carried many contradictions. As a cleric, Khomeini was keen to preserve centuries-long traditions of accepted Shi'i piety and correct conduct, such as attending to prayers and other religious duties. But he broke many traditional customs of the clerical establishment, such as giving public talks about mysticism on national TV and also through his admiration of mystical theologian-poets such as Mansur Hallaj (858–922) and Ibn Arabi (1165–1240); both condemned as heretics by orthodox clerics. As a poet, he voluntarily let his daughter-in-law, Fatemeh Tabatabai, publish his mystical poetry, which he first showed to her during one of their philosophy sessions. At the same time, as a cleric he was adamant to remind his followers that he was not a poet and had no talent in poetry – perhaps a way of showing his adherence to the clerical tradition of detachment from emotions.²¹ As an ascetic, Khomeini was content with minimal standards of living, but as a leader of a major political movement and later a theocracy, he was eager to adopt modern information technologies for his political objectives. As a mystic, his bodyguards could recollect his solitary mystical prayers late into the night, but they could also remember him watching Charlie Chaplin before his nightly meditations, reminding them of a populist leader with a keen interest in popular culture. As a *shariah*-minded cleric, Khomeini advanced the Islamization of policies such as banning alcohol and enforcing Islamic dress on women, but as a liberal-minded revolutionary he approved artificial insemination and sex change, along with the public display of art, music and film. How could these inconsistencies be rationalized?

Though by switching back and forth between images of democratic populism and mystical authoritarianism Khomeini created many ostensible paradoxes for a definitive image of himself to be presented to domestic and international audiences, in reality, such ambiguity in his presentation was strategically rational. In many ways, his performances of private and public life served the specific purpose of addressing the changing situations of the time as they emerged. The Islamization policies, for example, which he fully endorsed in the beginning of the revolution, were partly meant to limit the scope of political influence of his adversaries – especially Marxists and secular leftists – in the realm of social life. But his support for legalizing cinema, funfairs and music was meant to appease the pragmatists loyal to his movement, and also create a safety valve amid a repressive regime of control over public life, despite opposition from the conservative clerical establishment in Qom.

The use of modern information technologies, as another example, provided Khomeini with both an efficient method of communication and also a powerful platform upon which he would perform an audio and visual image of himself and his ideas as a political actor. Khomeini's interest in such technologies, however, was shaped at a strategic point in his political career; that is, during his exile in Iraq. In Najaf, where he became enormously popular among the Iranian *bazaaris* for bravely standing up to the Shah's White Revolution and capitulations, Khomeini would allow a photographer, sent from a group of *baazaris*, to strategically take photos of him at major religious places in the shrine city, producing an image to be consumed for his supporters back in Iran in terms of an aura of spirituality mixed with perseverance as a public figure in exile.²²

Also in Najaf, although his speeches were becoming increasingly popular for his sharp attacks against the Pahlavi regime and American presence in Iran, Khomeini began to use simpler and clearer language, loaded with powerful images that everyone could relate to and idealize.²³ This was

done strategically for the consumption of the religious audience, in particular the traditional capitalist *bazaari* class, as his speeches that were recorded on cassette tapes and sent to Iran by his students and supporters. This rhetorical strategy altered in Paris, as he approved the use of visual means of communication, especially television, to televise a transnational image of a populist revolutionary for an even wider audience, especially the educated middle classes. During this period, Khomeini's speeches carefully avoided the use of theological concepts and embraced an inclusive language that resonated with many, including liberals and secularists.

The key to Khomeini's political career from a revolutionary figure to a statesman was the ability to form a set of powerful memorials of himself and politics for the future generations of his Islamic Republic. Memory was the heart of Khomeini's politics. In his famous last will and testament, Khomeini's discourse, despite its apparent simplicity, is multilayered with meaning and rhetorical tactics designed for various audiences. In one passage, for instance, he refers to the "Arab and Aryan races" as people who are at par with "American, European and Soviet races," a clear indication to a populist discourse of race identity mostly popularized in the post-constitutional Revolution in Iran. In other passages, in contrast, Khomeini retreats to a pan-Islamic rhetoric and at times a nationalist one. It was precisely in what can be called shifting referencing practices that Khomeini was able to imprint a multifaceted image of himself in the minds of his followers.

It is such complexity of discursive practices, inclusive and multidirectional, that has helped Khomeini rise to the highest level of reverence by his followers in Iran and beyond. In post-Baathist Iraq, for instance, Khomeini's speeches that were originally translated in Arabic in the 1970s can still be bought in major Shi'i-dominated cities, especially in the impoverished Sadr city, where his pictures are posted next to other Shi'i figures such as Moqtada Sadr's, as the latter claims to be the political heir of the late Ayatollah in Iraq.²⁴ For Shi'is affiliated with the Hizbullah of Lebanon, Khomeini is seen as more than the founder of the Islamic Republic, and as a transnational figure who awoke the Shi'is from their slumbered life of marginality in Lebanon. In Beirut, seminars and conferences are held during the annual commemorative ceremonies of Khomeini's death for the younger Shi'i generations. Khomeini's mausoleum near Tehran's international airport (also named after him) is a major site where many Shi'is from faraway places, including India and Nigeria, continue to visit.

Memory, however, is always contentious. Equally important are memories of Khomeini as a brutal ruler who readily ordered the execution of thousands, approved the assassinations of opposition leaders and promoted international terrorism. In Iran, many of his foes, including some former followers, remember him as a cruel cleric who oversaw the execution of thousands of dissidents and the awful slaughter of Iranians during the Iran-Iraq war.²⁵ He is also accused of fostering a personality cult, and willingly allowing his followers to liken him to the Prophet and the Imams; an act of heresy within Shi'i orthodoxy. Equally important is the way he is remembered in a negative light outside of Iran. In the West, he is remembered for the American hostage crisis and, more famously, issuing his infamous *fatwa* for the death of Salman Rushdie in 1989. As Abrahamian described just years after the Rushdie affair, the uncompromising image of Ayatollah Khomeini had shaped "the consciousness of the West much like the grade-B horror movies that appear on American screens early each summer."²⁶ However, as a transnational figure, Khomeini's image was ultimately defined according to the way he strategically made decisions related to Iran's changing domestic politics, despite its international implications, as in the case of the Rushdie *fatwa*.

Notwithstanding its discontents and adversaries, the Islamic Republic serves as the ultimate legacy of Khomeini. The theocracy in power in Iran has survived largely because of its ability to creatively

adapt to different political circumstances, originally envisaged by its founder as an innovative revolutionary with a pragmatic eye. Note here that not all innovators are revolutionary, and not all revolutionaries are innovators. Fidel Castro is certainly a prominent revolutionary, but unlike Rafael Garcia Barcena or Vladimir Lenin, he has never been an innovative revolutionary. Khomeini, perhaps similar to Lenin, was inventive insofar as he dared to assimilate varied concepts and models of politics, and was revolutionary insofar as he dared to implement utopian ideas into practice and ensure their practical institutionalization through a vast network of merchants, students and followers. The Islamic Republic is an invented tradition.

In one of his lectures on the Iranian Revolution, Halliday described the Iranian revolution as a “storm” that came unannounced, changing the course of history. As the most massed-based upheaval in history, the Islamic Revolution marked an explosive event that brought to life a new political modernity of distinct Iranian trait. Like the 1979 Revolution, the legacy of Khomeini is also about the unexpected and contentious ways the Islamic Republic has been and continues to be shaped by his followers, who offer competing visions of the Islamic polity and memories of their revered Imam as the founder of the first theocratic order in modern history. But the Islamic Republic’s survival is largely due to its ability to evolve. The specter of Khomeini and his contentious memory will haunt Iran for generations to come.

[1](#) Fred Halliday, “The Contradictory Legacies of Ayatollah Khomeini: The Iranian Revolution at Twenty” in Richard Tapper (ed.), *Ayatollah Khomeini and the Modernization of Islamic Thought*, Occasional Paper 19 (London: Center of Near and Middle Eastern Studies, SOAS, 2000), pp. 60–63.

[2](#) The July 9 uprising began after a student-led demonstration in protest of the closure of the reformist newspaper, *Salam*, by the hardliner judiciary sparked week-long nationwide protests. A crackdown on the students and reformists from the Do-e Khordad Movement accordingly followed. The events were a reminder of a growing political culture of dissent with the election of the reformist Mohammad Khatami in 1997.

[3](#) The first signs of internal divisions began to surface days after the elections, when Ayatollah Ali Khamenei requested that the president fire Esfandiar Rahim Mashaei – a family member and close ally of the president – from the post of vice president. By keeping Mashaei, mostly despised by the conservatives for some of his stances on pre-Islamic Iranian history on culture, the newly elected Ahmadinejad sent a clear signal to other conservatives that he alone controlled who should or should not remain in his administration. By April 2011, the Ahmadinejad/Khamenei rift had evolved into a full-blown crisis. When Ahmadinejad fired another Khamenei loyalist, Intelligence Minister Heydar Moslehi, the Supreme Leader furiously intervened, vetoing the decision based on an authoritarian concept of *hokm-e hokomati*, or an extra-legal authority of the *faqih*, which was first applied during the reformist era as a way to curtail the authority of the Majlis over press reforms. Ahmadinejad’s immediate reaction surprised many observers. He abruptly stopped appearing in official meetings for

eleven days out of protest against the decision. The president's move crossed a major red line, especially when he set conditions for his return to office with demands such as reinstalling Mashaei to the vice presidency and appointing himself as the intelligence minister. Khamenei rejected his requests, though apparently he negotiated some kind of deal with Ahmadinejad, who eventually returned to his post. In the post-election period, the Supreme Leader would come to view Ahmadinejad as a liability.

4 Since 1979, the executive office has engaged in a number of major conflicts with the *vali-ye faqih*. The most notable is the case of Bani Sadr, the first president (February 4, 1980–June 21, 1981), who was impeached for challenging the cleric-dominated unelected institutions in power. Khomeini initiated the call for impeachment. Similar tensions also emerged during Khatami's presidency, though in a different political context and factional landscape. Even during the presidency of Khamenei, who was himself a loyalist of Khomeini, certain tensions were visible, especially over how Khamenei liberally interpreted some of Khomeini's more controversial decisions such as the Salman Rushdie affair. The only major exception has been the early years of Rafsanjani's presidency, when a "dual authority" to consolidate power after Khomeini's death was established between the president and the new *vali-ye faqih*, Khamenei, who had to rely heavily on the former for legitimacy. In the second term of Rafsanjani's presidency, tensions between the two institutions, with distinct political personalities, resurfaced; a conflict that continued into the 2009 political crisis.

5 Fred Halliday, "Iran's Revolutionary Spasm," July 1, 2005, Open Democracy, retrieved from http://www.opendemocracy.net/globalization-vision_reflections/iran_2642.jsp.

6 The 2003 municipal and 2004 parliamentary elections had heralded the emergence of new conservative groups such as Devotees Society (Jamiyat-e Isargaran) and Developers Council (Etelaf-i Abadgaran), entailing ideological and elite realignment that identified a new political class. The movement combined populism and nostalgia for the Iran-Iraq War, during which the Islamic revolutionary spirit was best illustrated on the battlefields. The main elite group that the new conservatives attacked was Hashemi Rafsanjani's faction, whose economic liberalization policies were perceived as ineffective at producing a more egalitarian development process that would benefit the lower-class segment of the population. It is important to note that the new conservative current can be described itself as reformist, but with a vision of political change mostly concerned with economic development based upon social justice, rather than cultural or political freedom as advocated by the Do-e Khordad Movement under Khatami. See Ali Gheissari and Vali Nasr, *Democracy in Iran: History and the Quest for Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 142–145; Anoushirvan Ehteshami and Mahjoob Zweiri, *Iran and the Rise of Its Neoconservatives: The Politics of Tehran's Silent Revolution* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007).

- [7](#) See Ervand Abrahamian, *Khomeinism: Essays on the Islamic Republic* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1993).
- [8](#) See Daniel Brumberg, *Reinventing Khomeini: The Struggle for Reform in Iran* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).
- [9](#) The rhetorical use of the term “revolution” enters Khomeini’s political discourse primarily in the late 1970s, especially when he moved to Paris in 1978. It is important to note that during the Najaf period (1965–1978), Khomeini refrained from using the term revolution frequently, although the term was once used in his *Hokumat-e Islami (Islamic Government: Guardianship of the Jurist)*, most likely inserted by his students.
- [10](#) Said Amir Arjomand, *After Khomeini: Iran under His Successors* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 19.
- [11](#) Vanessa Martin, *Creating an Islamic State: Khomeini and the Making of a New Iran* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2000), p. 111.
- [12](#) Baqer Moin, *Khomeini: Life of the Ayatollah* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2009), p. 138.
- [13](#) See Edward W. Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000).
- [14](#) Elvire Corboz, “An Ayatollah in Exile: The Najaf History of Khomeini’s Religious and Political Leadership,” unpublished.
- [15](#) Ervand Abrahamian, *Khomeinism*, pp. 47–51.

- [16](#) For Khomeini's change of discourse on women, see Ziba Mir-Hosseini, "Ayatollah Khomeini and the Question of Women: Pre- and Post-Revolutionary Positions" in Richard Tapper (ed.), *Ayatollah Khomeini and the Modernization of Islamic Thought*, Occasional Paper 19, (London: Center of Near and Middle Eastern Studies, SOAS, 2000), pp. 27–34.
- [17](#) Janet Afary and Kevin B. Anderson (eds.), *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: Gender and the Seductions of Islamism* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2005), p. 239.
- [18](#) I define "military-theocracy" in terms of the consolidation of a clergy-military monopoly of power in the systemic prioritizing of technical security considerations in the management and performance of politics. In terms of elite institutional realignment, it is not that the IRGC is simply gaining power over the civilian sphere, but that there is a growing cross-fertilization of an organizational network, familial ties, and information security ties between the clergy and the paramilitary forces, which is shaping a very unique elite guardian class with claims on state power. This state-building pattern, I suggest, has considerably enhanced since the 2009 elections.
- [19](#) Ruhollah Khomeini, *Vasiyat-namey-e siyasi-elahi rahbar-e kabir-e enqelab islam* (Tehran: Moassesey-e Tanzim va Nashr-e Asar-e Imam Khomeini, 1380 [2001]), pp. 63–64.
- [20](#) Arjomand, *After Khomeini*, p. 41.
- [21](#) On his poetry, Khomeini wrote, "I have to tell the truth that not in my youth, known for its season of poetry and poetic passion, which has already passed me, nor in my older years, which has already passed me too, nor in the course of my entire life, which now approaches its end, have I ever had the ability to write poetry." Ruhollah Khomeini, *Diwan-e Imam: sorodha-ye hazrat-e Imam Khomeini* (Tehran: Moassesey-e Tanzim va Nashr-e Asar-e Imam Khomeini, 1372 [1993]), p. 20.
- [22](#) For an account of Khomeini's photo sessions in Najaf, see Ismail Ferdosi-pour, *Khaterat-e hojatol eslam val moslemin Ismail Ferdosi-pour* (Tehran: Moassesey-e Tanzim va Nashr-e Asar-e Imam Khomeini), pp. 115–117.

[23](#) Martin, *Creating an Islamic State*, p. 126.

[24](#) Not all Shi'i Iraqis, of course, have been impressed by Khomeini and his political legacy. In a country known for its long tradition of quietist Shi'ism, Khomeini's political theology and brand of government continues to be viewed as problematic, if not deviant by many Shi'is, especially the high-ranking clerical establishment such as Ayatollah Ali Sistani. The Sadrist movement's sympathetic views of Khomeini are also complex, and much of the admiration is for Khomeini's populism rather than his political theology, which Ayatollah Baqir al-Sadr, Moqtada's uncle and the intellectual figure behind the movement, most likely disagreed with. See Chibli Mallat, *The Renewal of Islamic Law: Muhammad Baqer as-Sadr, Najaf and the Shi'i International* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 50–54.

[25](#) Khomeini rarely displayed emotions in public; for instance, when reacting to the death of others (including his son Mostafa). Vali Nasr offers an intriguing account of a meeting between Ayatollah Mehdi Haeri Yazdi and Khomeini at his house in Tehran in the 1980s. Deeply troubled by the bloody war against Iraq, Haeri asked Khomeini if he could stop the bloodshed because “it is not right for Muslims to kill Muslims,” to which Khomeini replied, “Do you also criticize God when he sends an earthquake?” Vali Nasr, *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts within Islam Will Shape the Future* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006), p. 120.

[26](#) See Abrahamian, *Khomeinism*, p. 1. For a detailed account of Khomeini's image as it evolved from the 1979 Revolution to his death in 1989, see Martin, *Creating an Islamic State*, pp. 174–187.

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